

GLIMPSES OF CHINA THROUGH THE EXPORT WATERCOLOURS OF THE 18th-19th CENTURIES

A Selection from the British Museum's
Collection

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the roots of Chinese export watercolours – produced at Canton for Western customers, in the 18th-19th centuries – in the local tradition of painting and illustration, attributing a ‘Chinese identity’ to these authentic works of art, often considered as a semi-foreign piecework derivative and inferior to literati and court painting. Furthermore, their historical and anthropological importance is also vigorously stressed: these particular paintings are presented as documents that provide an insight into Chinese traditions, customs and daily life, and reflect the evolution of the diplomatic, commercial and cultural relationships between China and the West.

The discussion gradually develops through the analysis of the albums in the British Museum’s collection, which, despite being one of the most comprehensive of this sort, had not been specifically examined by any scholar before. The watercolour sets, described from various angles, and compared with other figurative materials, are used as concrete examples, giving substance and immediate reference to ideas and concepts.

The dissertation opens with some considerations about the mutual artistic exchange and influence between China and the West in the 18th-19th centuries. First, the impact of Chinese image and art in Europe is presented. Then, the main characteristics of Chinese export art and the development of Chinese export painting are illustrated. These observations are followed by the examination of the watercolours at the British Museum, considering state of preservation, availability for research, and scarcity and inadequacy of the museum’s records. A summary of all the themes depicted in the nearly one hundred sets is also given. A selection of nearly half of them – including the illustration of production activities, trades and crafts, religious subjects, festivals and ceremonies – is analysed in depth, thus providing an exhaustive and precise picture of the treatment of the most relevant subjects, each representing a significant aspect of the Chinese world at that time.

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INTRODUCTION

The popularity of Chinese export painting and export art in general was not limited to the time of their production, as early as three centuries ago, but still continues on the international market of art and antiquities, as demonstrated by the persistent presence of such products in the catalogues of auction houses and art dealers. However, this subject has raised less enthusiasm among scholars, who often treat it with a sceptical approach.

The source of inspiration for a research about the watercolours executed in Canton for western clients in the 18th and 19th centuries has been chiefly provided by two major publications: Craig Clunas' *Chinese Export Watercolours* (1984), which presents the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection, and a chapter contained in Carl Crossman's *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade* (1991), which illustrates the 'Asian Export' wing of the Peabody Museum of Salem. So far, these two works also represent the only most relevant and specific references. As a matter of fact, while a certain number of texts and exhibition catalogues about the general theme of the artistic production of the 'China Trade' are available, and many studies about Chinese export porcelain have been published, very few reference materials about Chinese export watercolours can be found. Comprehensive books about Chinese art tend to virtually ignore export painting. When it is briefly mentioned, it is mostly defined as either a semiforeign piecework derivative of and inferior to literati and court art, or a mere decorative adjunct to the western art of the period. Hence, in order to compensate for the misinterpretations and the lack of appropriate analysis, this research investigates the roots of export watercolours in the local tradition of painting and illustration, and attributes a 'Chinese identity' to these authentic works of art, usually considered as hybrid, spurious products.

Together with the recognition of the artistic value, the historical and anthropological importance is also stressed vigorously. It is widely held that the Chinese artists working for foreigners depicted an ideal, picturesque image of the country, as their "foreign patrons wished to see it". This is said by G. H. R. Tillotson in *Fan Kwae Pictures* (1987), but many others share the same belief. On the other hand, especially in recent years contrasting opinions have been emerging: part of the critics, represented, for instance, by Carl Crossman and Cunjie Cheng, vice-director of the

Guangzhou Museum, has started considering export watercolours as documents that provide an insight into Chinese traditions, customs and daily life. Therefore, the present dissertation not only highlights and supports the new views, but also points out that these paintings were more than a forerunner of photography. They were actually the expression of a particular phase in the history of the relations between China and the West, and reflected the changes in diplomatic strategies and in the balance of economical, political and military power between the two sides. In particular, it is shown that in the 18th century and the early decades of the 19th century, the Chinese artists were still in a position of deciding what to depict, and how the Chinese world should appear in their pictures. On the contrary, following the tensions about the opium trade in the second quarter of the 19th century, and the overbearing attempt of western countries, and most of all Britain, to impose their authority on Chinese commercial affairs and social issues, the Canton painters became more subject to their foreign clients' demands. Taking these considerations into great account, while presenting the results of the research, suggestions are made about keys for the reading and interpretation of these paintings, both as works of art and as products of a specific society in a precise period of its evolution.

Besides the investigation of technical and stylistic concerns, and of the reasons and meanings behind the representation of each particular subject, the thesis discusses in detail the export album leaves preserved at the British Museum, which have not been specifically examined, so far. Although there are thousands of similar specimens spread all over the world, very little has been published about them. According to the available information, it seems that they are just treated as a minor part in groups also including other items of Chinese export art. Moreover, they usually cover a limited range of depicted subjects. It is the case of the Sze Yuan Tang Collection and the Wallem Collection – both in Canton – which only contain watercolours of the China Coast and ship portraits, respectively. Thus, the British Museum's collection – together with the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection, already discussed by Craig Clunas – emerges as one of the most comprehensive, counting for nearly one hundred sets about all sorts of different themes. Since it offers an extensive panorama of the production of these peculiar paintings, as well as many topics for discussion, it certainly deserves a deeper appreciation.

While considering an aspect of the western impact in China, it can't be forgotten that at the same time, a phenomenon of cultural exchange and influence was also flowing

westwards. Hence, the first chapter emphasises the main effects of elements and images belonging to Chinese civilization on European art.

Before going into the details of the examination of export watercolours, some general information is provided in the second chapter, focused on the explanation of the concept of 'Chinese Export Art', and especially on the development of Chinese export painting from the second half of the 18th century throughout the 19th century.

The whole research has been mainly based on the direct analysis of the British Museum's sets, the access to which has been relatively easy. However, as it is pointed out in the chapter presenting the collection, the data of the museum's archive about the acquisition, provenance and time of execution of the paintings are scarce and unsatisfactory. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find precise details of private trade transactions involving export art, for most of these records are dispersed or lost. On the other hand, historical documentation about the Chinese reality and the presence of foreigners in China during the 18th and 19th centuries is offered by the accounts and memoirs of western visitors at that time.

Due to the particular nature of export art, repudiated by the official Chinese art critics until recent times, there are no reports and treatises about its history, producers, styles and techniques, as they exist about Chinese conventional artistic production. For the purpose of identifying these characteristics other figurative materials for reference and comparison have been largely used. Such materials include: traditional Chinese paintings of different periods with both secular and religious themes; printed illustrations; paintings on walls and bricks; export watercolours from different collections, among which those held by the British Library have proved particularly interesting; other products of export art, such as porcelain and paintings in oil on canvas; drawings and paintings by western artists who travelled to China in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The presentation of the album leaves preserved at the British Museum is not a mere description of technical and stylistic features, but is rather a critical analysis functional to the development of the discussion of various problems. Concrete figurative examples are a constant support for theoretical issues, giving substance and immediate reference to ideas and concepts. The sets are grouped according to the depicted subject. This distribution is necessary to establish a clear thematic order, and to give an exhaustive and precise picture of the treatment of different subjects, each representing an aspect of the Chinese world of that time. In particular, four

thematic groups – production activities, trades and crafts, religious subjects and processions and ceremonies – have been discussed thoroughly, as they are in many respects the most representative of the whole collection for the purposes of this study.

All the comments and the remarks are finally extrapolated from each chapter and summarised. The main views and considerations inferred from the research are confirmed and reinforced, leading to the conclusion that the Chinese export watercolours produced in the 18th and 19th centuries are a peculiar expression of Chinese art and allow us to get an interesting general glimpse of the Chinese world during those days.

CHAPTER 1

ENCOUNTER WITH CHINA

China images

When separate cultures come into contact with each other, they start interacting by means of dynamic relations, which cannot be confined within the boundary of an inside-outside model, and cannot be restricted into a specific cultural space. These relations give way to processes of syncretism and synthesis, and so to the exertion of mutual influences.

The definition of 'influence' and of its effects on a cultural system is often very confusing. As a matter of fact, while the impact of an external factor on a tradition certainly implies the introduction of an element of novelty, it doesn't always involve a deviation from what would otherwise have been expected, but it may function as an incentive and a support to a spontaneous change already in progress.

Speaking of 'influence' as stimulus and enrichment, particular attention should be paid to the interaction between eastern and western cultures, or more precisely between China and Europe, which Michael Sullivan was not wrong in defining as "one of the most significant events in world history since the Renaissance".¹ In this regard, it is very interesting to notice that the westward flow of ideas and forms from China penetrated the European realm in a quite indirect and subtle way, affecting people's thinking and taste – especially during the 18th century – more deeply than it was realised. This force was particularly active and generative in art, though it was not merely a matter of motifs and techniques, but rather of perceptions and enlarged visions. Thus, the study of the 'sinicised' European artistic production of the 18th century throws light on how Europe got to know about Chinese art, and in a broader sense, about Chinese culture, how she looked to them, and what she thought of them. Marco Polo's account of his long experience in China during the 13th century is generally considered as the most incisive prologue to the construction of images of China in the minds of western people. From the 16th century more information about

¹ Cf. Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1989, p. 1.

this far-away country reached Europe through the reports of religious missionaries, who, in some instances, spent many years at the imperial court in Peking. Later, among the creators of images there were travellers of all kinds, such as merchants, administrators, military people, and scholars. The various travel literature often contributed to the formulation of distorted pictures, tinged with fantasy and wishful thinking. Furthermore, representations and judgements also fluctuated from positive to negative according to the political and economic circumstances of each period, and following the tendency for one country to hold the images of China at different times. For instance, for most of the 18th century French patterns, chiefly based on the idea of China as a fictional site, predominated. But towards the 19th century they were replaced by English criteria and statements, the character of which was more decidedly determined by actual diplomatic and commercial contacts. However, despite the fact that the views and interpretations tended to be filtered through and conditioned by the concerns and disputes of Europe, the Chinese world always exercised a sort of magnetic attraction on the European mind, and its understanding saw a gradual enhancement especially from the Enlightenment period onwards.

It was exactly during that time and the following Romantic period that China and the East as a whole were a central theme of intellectual debates in the West. The exotic information – as has Clarke pointed out – not only provided material for entertainment and distraction, but was instrumental in the creation of an “external reference point” for the critical “self-questioning” and “self-renewing” of western traditions and belief systems.² The writings about China by thinkers such as Diderot, Voltaire and Montesquieu, figured social elements that were marginal to, and that contested the social structures of the *ancien régime*, namely the French feudal organisation of the 17th and 18th centuries. For example, in his *Essai sur les mœurs*, Voltaire argued for the inherent superiority of Confucian philosophy, as well as of the Chinese political system, which he claimed was based not on a hereditary aristocracy, but on rational principles.³

In fact, it seems that many of the images of China are more a reflection of European attitudes and thought, than a telling insight into the object of the description. The endeavour by westerners to incorporate some aspects of a foreign cultural heritage

² See J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 6.

³ This essay, published in 1756, can be considered as a compendium of all the feelings of admiration towards China at that time. Cf. Voltaire, F. M. A., *Essai sur les mœurs*, Paris, Garnier, 1963.

into their own culture may be interpreted as one of the manifestations of a particular phenomenon. This is to say that for a long time the desire and attempt to control and dominate China both economically and politically developed together with a sense of admiration towards this alien civilisation and the effort to emulate it in many fields.

European attempts to break through Chinese world

Jesuit missionaries had played the role of the main link in the cultural encounter between Europe and the Far East from the 16th century to the beginning of the 18th century, when in China their activities were interrupted because of disputes over ritual issues, and persecutions against Christians began. As a consequence of these incidents, the intermediary function of the Jesuits was mostly taken over by business people, and by the beginning of the 19th century the idea of China as, above all, a first-rate world-market – which was not a new one by any means – became the main concern of western public opinion. Thus, Western traders and diplomacy concentrated all their efforts on the attempt of overcoming the Qing (1644-1911) protectionist policy, which aimed at protecting “China’s Great Harmony” and promoted an internal economic development.

Following the restrictions imposed by Chinese authorities, foreign trade was limited to the port of Canton and exclusively during the trading season from September to April. To tackle these obstacles, westerners devised different strategies, and by the middle of the 18th century Indian goods under British entrepreneurial management dominated China’s imports.

The English pressure for the expansion of the trade of Indian opium was actually one of the major causes of the war of 1840-42. The Treaty of Nanking, which marked the defeat of China, granted new special privileges to foreign traders and the opening of other ports, giving, thus, the possibility of an assault on the Chinese market, up to the time of the successful Chinese reaction, at the end of the 19th century.

However, Rhoads Murphey stresses that westerners never achieved their expansionist goals in China completely.⁴ Most of the foreign merchants were not able to overcome the language difficulties and to acquire sufficient knowledge of the Chinese market, with its varied and peculiar characteristics, and its own sophisticated system of control and management. Hence, they always remained dependent on local mediators. Furthermore, Chinese traditional cultural pride and sense of self-sufficiency represented a solid barrier to a deeper penetration of the country, the economic system, values and institutions.

Chinese enchantment and Orientalism

The most striking characteristic of the contacts between Europe and China over the centuries is the one-sidedness of the West's interest in the Far East. While westerners always tried to explore, study, conquer and, in some ways, assimilate Chinese culture, there had rarely been such a strong desire and such an active effort from Chinese side, one of the most relevant exceptions being emperor Qianlong's (1736-1795) curiosity and praise of western art and architecture.

Many factors encouraged the fascination with China. Among the theoretical concerns, there was a romanticising tendency to escape from western current ills into some remote and fantastic 'Orient'. Empirical concerns involved mere curiosity and desire to know, while pragmatic concerns included commercial and political issues, and religious conversion.

The intellectual and practical involvement with China can be considered as part of a much wider and extended phenomenon that goes under the definition of 'Orientalism'. Although this word is now more typically associated with the western attitudes towards the cultures of the Middle East, it originally referred to the western attitudes towards South and East Asia. According to the explanation provided by Clarke, since its first appearance in France in the 1830s, this term has been employed "to refer to Oriental scholarship, to characterise a certain genre of romantic-fantasy

⁴ On the reasons for the Chinese resistance to the western model, see: Rhoads Murphey, *The Outsiders*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1977, pp. 102-103; Franz Schurmann and Orville Schell, eds., *Imperial China*, New York, Vintage Books, 1967, passim.

literature, to describe a genre of painting, and – most significantly in recent times – to mark out a certain kind of ideological purview of the East which was a product of western imperialism”.⁵ However, as this scholar also warns, Orientalism should not be contemplated only within the narrow framework of western expansionism and hegemonic approach to the East, and as a fixed, simple, unified subject. On the contrary, historical discontinuities and changes in the focus, together with the diversity of ends and purposes need to be underlined. Furthermore, it is also important to remember that words like ‘West’, ‘East’, and ‘Orient’ are often used as semantic artifices in order to reduce “endless complexities and diversities into manageable and falsifying unities”.⁶

Although in Orientalist thought the tendency to keep explicitly distanced and separated the ‘West’ from ‘that part of the world’ identified as ‘East’, the underlying theory in Orientalist art, and especially in painting, was not a theory of ‘Otherness’, but rather one of ‘cultural cross-reference’, for, as stressed by John Mackenzie, visions of the Orient represented the fantasies and fears, as well as the aspirations and the renewed values of European artists.⁷ As a matter of fact, the term ‘Orientalism’ in its art-historical meaning is mainly used to indicate the large number of representations not only of the Middle East, but also of South Asia and the Far East, produced in Europe from the 18th century up to the 20th century. When analysing these works of art, it is necessary to bear in mind that among the authors there were both professional and amateur artists, and that some of them travelled extensively, or even settled for long periods in the East, while others never visited the places and sceneries that they were depicting.

The trade of Orientalist paintings was extremely buoyant during the 19th century. While the best known of the painters of Eastern themes were French, the principal market was England. Picturesque water-colouring was quite fashionable, but in order to satisfy the increasing demand, several artists produced a considerable amount of engravings, which could reach a much wider audience, providing saleable but repetitive images.

⁵ Cf. J. J. Clarke, op. cit., p. 7.

⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷ See John Mackenzie, *Orientalism*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1995, p. 55.

It is worth considering the careful distinction of five phases in the production of Orientalist art, suggested by Mackenzie.⁸ At the beginning, there was the imaginative and fantastic representation of oriental figures. Then, the tradition of topographical and archaeological 'realism' followed. This realistic trend continued in the third phase, with the depiction of very detailed minutiae. Of a different character were the fourth and fifth phases, developed at the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century, as the former privileged less glamourised and more reflective subjects and moods, while the latter moved towards a certain degree of abstraction, pursuing a technical, rather than thematic, commitment.

However, it can be noticed that no matter what phase they belonged to, Orientalist paintings, usually show a clear sense of timelessness, as, not only artists, but also the consumers of this kind of artistic production, always sought and found in the East the alluring quality of a timeless dimension.

The appeal of Chinese art

The creation of an 'appropriate' East was a natural and unavoidable process determined by the interaction of European taste, demand, market forces and commodity production. Yet even if the reproduction and influence of Eastern art was filtered through the European sensibility, its characteristics, forms, techniques and moods were perceived as something radically different from those of Europe, therefore, without losing their affecting and modifying potential.

In the light of these considerations, it is possible to understand what kind of relationship was established between Chinese and European arts in the 18th century. At that time, the Rococo style was in vogue in Europe. It was characterised by a relaxed feeling and bizarre forms, expressed in subtle lines, pale tones and gradations without sharp definition. Scholars usually agree that it was in this subtlety of feeling, sublimated in the delicate tints of Chinese porcelain and the vaporous colours of Chinese silks, that westerners first recognised an affinity in charm and grace of

⁸ Ibid., pp. 48-50.

Rococo and Chinese culture. Hence, European design started being enriched with a Chinese flavour.

The arts of China influenced western artists by presenting the example of an art, which, with its disregard for the western conventions of symmetry and perspective, was the antithesis of the rigidity and perfect regularity of traditional European classicism. Painters and designers, such as Watteau, Boucher, Pillement, adopted what to their eyes were whimsical and fantastic elements in Chinese representations and ornamentations, exaggerating the casual and asymmetrical effect through their unfamiliarity with the foreign artistic and compositional criteria. In this way, Chinese motifs assisted in the liberation of European decorative art, and Chinese fashion strengthened the anti-classical tendencies of the Rococo movement.

As the popular vogue of Chinese art and design was created, the number of imitations of Chinese art objects also increased, in order to satisfy less affluent collectors and to swell the collections of great noblemen. Moreover, the fanciful European adaptation of Chinese styles involved all the spheres of artistic production, in furniture, pottery and textile design.

Yet it must be remembered that the attitude of Europeans towards Chinese art was very selective, since Rococo taste only seized upon the elements that appealed to its own sense of *décor*. In fact, on the one hand, they greatly prized the meticulous representation and faithful rendering of realistic details in the depiction of natural themes, such as the typical birds and flowers. On the other hand, they mercilessly criticised the Chinese drawing of the human form, regarded as completely distorted, and condemned the inadequacy of Chinese methods in the representation of three-dimensional objects and spaces.

Michael Sullivan is among those art historians who are extremely critical in estimating the western approach to Chinese art. In particular, he writes that this kind of stiff and pedantic attitude "suggests that the artists are apt to 'see' in the work of other artists only what they themselves can make use of".⁹

As far as painting techniques are concerned, two main features are apparently borrowed from China. First, watercolour painting grew out of the need for a new rendering of natural scenes, corresponding to a new perception of nature itself. That is to say that landscape was then depicted as a detached scene, removed to a distance,

⁹ Cf. Michael Sullivan, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

and in which forms were nebulous and melt into one another. Adolf Reichwein even dared suggest that the overall vaporous and almost monochromatic tone – evident in the paintings by Watteau – reveals a sort of unconscious affinity with the Chinese landscape painting of Song dynasty (960-1279).¹⁰ Second, the adoption of a rapid and sketchy execution and the use of outlines in dark ink developed from the traditional Chinese ink monochrome painting with brush. According to Reichwein, one of the first to employ these techniques in landscape painting was the English painter John Robert Cozens (1752-1797), who is known for Swiss and Italian sceneries.¹¹

Chinese aesthetic ideas of landscape painting are mirrored in the arrangement of European gardens from the middle of the 18th century. In fact, the concept of a 'controlled disorder', aimed at emphasising, rather than disturbing, the natural composition, is fully displayed in garden design. This strong reaction against the formal and geometrical structure of the gardens in Italian and French style is perfectly in tune with the naturalness and freedom in the Rococo taste.

Frequently, gardens in the Chinese style were also adorned with Chinese architectural structures, such as bridges, pavilions, pagodas, bathhouses and huts. The architect who exerted the greatest influence on the development of Chinese architecture and gardening in Europe was Sir William Chambers. His publications and works are particularly interesting because he was one of the few who had actually visited China.¹²

Garden buildings are actually the main recognisable expression of the Chinese influence on European architecture. Through the observation of the extant examples it is possible to delineate a gradual shift from the mere imitation of Chinese features to a deliberate free mixture of Chinese and European elements. Furthermore, it is evident that in architecture – as well as in all the other fields previously examined – the appeal of the Chinese style as a whole was its exoticism, without a true understanding of its theoretical and constructive principles.

¹⁰ See Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1925, p. 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹² For more information about Chambers, see Jan Wirgin, "The Imitation of Chinese Architecture in Europe", in William Watson, ed., *The Westward Influence of the Chinese Arts from the 14th to the 18th Century*, University of London, 1972, pp. 47-50.

The end of the 'China-cult'

It has been well assessed by critics that the 'enthusiasm' for Chinese art in Europe reached its peak in the first half of the 18th century, but the influence of China on the emergence of the Romantic sensibility in the second half of the 18th century seems less investigated. Watercolour painting, already introduced in the Rococo period, became extremely popular among Romantic painters, as it allowed a more spontaneous and immediate artistic expression.

Furthermore, the charming flavour of Chinese art resisted well into the late 18th century, albeit combined with the cool elegance and rigorous form of the Neo-Classical style.

Yet the relentless decline of the Chinese vogue in the West can't be denied. At the turn of the century, China even became an object of humour and scorn rather than adulation. It is particularly significant the fact that also those thinkers who had previously regarded China with great reverence, as a model of humane enlightened despotism, later recanted their praises.

Various factors contributed to the collapse of 'sinomania'.

The expulsion of Christian missionaries from China in 1770 gave rise to the suspicion that the image of that country had been idealised and inflated, and the wisdom of its political, social and economic institutions had been overestimated.

Basil Guy suggested that among the major rivals of the Chinese ideal there were three "exotic movements", namely Hinduism, Neo-Classicism and a sentimental interpretation of Rousseau's supposed primitivism",¹³ which at this point need a brief explanation.

First of all, India had gradually become public domain in the West, through the circumstance of political events and European colonial plans. Therefore, the novelty of another ancient Asiatic civilisation until then still relatively little known, provided a new, fresh source expected to satisfy a voracious desire for exploration and knowledge.

At the same time when interest in Hindu studies was developing, the interest in the ancient Graeco-Roman world was rising again, following the excavations of

¹³ Cf. Basil Guy, *The French Image of China before and after Voltaire*, Genève, Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1963, p. 412.

Pompeii, Herculaneum and Paestum in mid-18th century. Hence, Hellenism completely displaced Chinese culture and Confucian ethics as a subject of intellectual enquiry.

Moreover, the discrediting of the China image was also engendered by Rousseau's melancholic exaltation of a primordial, uncontaminated nature. In fact, according to his formulation of the myth of the "*Noble Savage*", he described Chinese existence as being more artificial and unnatural than that of the Europeans.

It is finally worth pointing out two more factors that played an important role in the eclipse of Chinese cultural prestige in Europe. One of them is the decline of the Qing dynasty, which occurred during the 19th century, and which had deleterious effects on the administrative mechanisms, as well as on the intellectual and artistic worlds. The other factor was the success of the industrial Revolution, which gave great impetus to innovation and progress in many fields. At this stage, Europeans developed an unprecedented sense of superior power and efficiency. Now they felt themselves to be pre-eminent and became convinced that there was nothing more to learn from the Chinese civilisation that they had been considering so inspiring till not long before.

CHAPTER 2

CHINESE EXPORT PAINTING

Chinese export art

The so-called “Chinese Export Art” developed with the international commercial contacts between the 18th and 19th centuries, in response to the demand of western traders for specific artistic products to resell in Europe and the United States. But this phenomenon was not new for the Chinese craft market. As it is proved by the considerable amount – still extant – of Chinese art objects traded in the past along the ancient Silk Routes, Chinese artists and artisans had been able to meet the requirements of foreign customers for many centuries before. Thus, it doesn’t seem necessary to separate off the artistic production for western customers in that specific period, as if it was a completely new and different practice.

It should also be noticed that these particular goods have been disregarded by art historians - especially from the Chinese side – for a long time, since they were not considered as real works of art, and were not thought of as distinctively Chinese. But with a more careful analysis, it can be recognised that these objects certainly are part of the history and material culture of China, and deserve the attribution of artistic merits. On the other hand, the export art is worth considering not only from an artistic and aesthetical point of view, but also for its socio-anthropological implications. As a matter of fact, it tells us a lot about how Chinese culture and the western cultures saw each other in the past.

Moreover, scholars, such as Craig Clunas,¹ point out that the quality and the evolution of styles was significantly influenced by the changes of historical circumstances. The first phase, in the 17th century, was characterised by the exchange of artefacts not greatly distinguished from those made for the inland consumption. During the 18th century an interesting combination of Chinese and western elements prevailed. But, as foreigners gained more and more economic and military power during the 19th century, the balance of the relationship shifted completely from the producer to the customer. Chinese culture was disrespectfully reduced to a few

¹Cf. Craig Clunas, *Export Art and Design*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1987, p. 18.

stereotyped images and export art descended to the level of a very simplified and trivial "tourist art" with little appeal.

Different forms of export painting

Painting was only a part – though a quite important one – of the varied Chinese artistic production for export, which included silk, ceramics, lacquer, furniture, carved ivories, metalwork, and painted cloisonné enamels and wallpaper.

The roots of export painting, mostly produced by unnamed artists in workshops, and organised for purposes far removed from those of the official artistic tradition of court artists and literati painters, can be found back in the 15th-16th centuries, when these works were either sold on the Chinese internal market, or exported abroad, chiefly to Japan. From the 17th century onwards Canton became the main centre for the production of this particular form of art. The earliest Canton painting workshop to have produced on western commissions, identified so far, is marked by the name of the artist "Pu Qua", and was active from the 1780s.

The Chinese craftsmen were appreciated by western clients for their sensitive virtuosity and for being quick, apprehensive and cheap. On the one hand, they were skilful at imitating foreign models with exact fidelity, on the other hand, it should be recognised that their own style was not anonymous. Their paintings were made to western specifications, sometimes using new materials and techniques, but remained essentially Chinese, particularly in the mode and skill of their manufacture, as well as in the use of traditional decorative motifs. Only a few artists' names – especially of the period of the most various and best production, between 1780 and 1825 – are known so far. However, what is important is the identification of schools with their time brackets.

Much of the groundwork of identification, dating and attribution has been done in the United States, but further information about the paintings – which means papers, pigments, brushes and techniques – is still needed. The large body of literature on business aspects – such as records of western ports, customs papers, ships' manifests, merchants' orders – provides a concise and accurate view of the trading, the goods and their costs, and the life of foreign merchants at Canton. However, more technical

and stylistic details can be acquired only through a thorough analysis of the paintings themselves.

The mechanisms of western intervention in the world of Chinese visual culture are still not completely clear, but some scholars have pointed out that the trade in Canton had a greater impact on the pictorial art of late imperial China than that of the western Jesuit painters at the imperial court in Peking during the 18th century.² This phenomenon is probably due to the fact that missionaries, such as Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) and Jean-Denis Attiret (1702-1768), were working in the service of the emperors themselves, who in succession were Kangxi (1662-1722), Yongzheng (1723-1735) and Qianlong (1736-1796).³ Hence, although western art had roused some curiosity at the Chinese court, it was considered politically convenient to keep some distance from European culture and not to associate too closely with the foreigners, in order to preserve a stable internal authority under the Manchu government. The situation was different farther south, in Canton, where, despite the restrictions imposed by the central authorities to international trade, the artistic production was more strongly influenced by the requirements of the western traders.

One of the most innovative elements introduced from the West was oil painting. Early oils on canvas were usually thinly painted with colours delicately washed on over a wide weave canvas that had been heavily gessoed and primed. Sometimes a fine black-grey under-drawing can be seen in some areas. The earliest oil painter in Canton identified so far was Guan Zuolin (active: 1765-1805) – commonly known as Spoilum – whose style was highly regarded by his western clients.⁴ However, it seems that at first, oil painting didn't suit the traditional Chinese taste, since it was mostly used for the representation of typically western subjects or themes. An early example is the portrait of Captain Benjamin Smith, executed by Spoilum in 1790 (fig. 2.1). The assimilation of the foreign mode of portraiture had become so deep, that formerly this work was thought to have been executed by a late 18th century American portrait painter. Carl Crossman explains that the importance of this portrait

² Ibid.

³ The work of Jesuit painters at the Chinese imperial court has been deeply studied. For an overview on this subject cf. Michel Beurdeley, *Peintres Jésuites in Chine*, Arcueil Cedex, Anthèse, 1997.

⁴ Very little is known about this artist and his production. For a discussion about his paintings on glass and portraits see C. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1991, pp. 35-53.

lies in two aspects of Spoilum's production.⁵ First, this is one of the very few of his portraits with a landscape background, as other portraits usually have simple, plain backgrounds with a shadowy treatment behind the head. Second, the linear qualities of the eyes, nose and mouth are characteristic of his portraits that date from the early 1790s to 1805.

Paintings in oil on canvas were already executed as early as the 1770s. Many of them depicted port views, and especially the Canton seafront, which was a very popular theme. As in portraiture, in port painting the western influence is evident, probably determined by the presence of European artists – like Thomas Hickey, J. Webber, William Alexander, the Daniells – and European competent amateur painters in Canton before 1815. Evidence of this influence can be found by comparing *The European Factories at Canton in China*, by William Daniell and *The Canton Waterfront*, by an unknown Chinese artist (fig. 2.2, a-b). The first is a large folio hand-coloured aquatint based on the drawing done on Daniell's visit to Canton in 1784-1785. It gives the very idea of a design as a graphic two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional subject, and of the western conventions of a fixed-point perspective. The second is a watercolour on silk, in which, despite the European influence, there is still clear the manner of a Chinese scroll painting with sweeping panoramas and delicate brushwork. In this kind of depictions it seems that artists were bound by a set of conventions in composition, which is seen throughout many port views. They tried to record every change that took place in the arrangement of the fences, buildings, flags on the Canton seafront, but they remained within a tight compositional vocabulary that was repeated over and over again: low horizon, stark, bare and somewhat flat quality.

Only a few ship portraits from 1785 to 1815 have been recognised up to date, but after that period, broadside ship portraits became one of the most popular subjects of the 19th century. The *United States*, probably by Spoilum, (fig. 2.3, a) was derived from American versions based on the English print *The King's Ship Dressed with the Colours of Different Nations*, engraved in 1794, with the flags changed to those of the United States. A great number of ship paintings and watercolours of American vessels were done in European ports during the same period. For example, *Merchant Ship* (fig. 2.3, b) by an unknown western artist depicts an unidentified American

⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

merchant vessel engaged in the early China trade, painted probably during a voyage of the ship to Europe.

Chinese landscapes and garden scenes were a fashionable subject in particular for paintings in oil on canvas from the end of the 18th century throughout the 19th century. Their predecessors in the third quarter of the 18th century were gouaches and watercolours on silk or paper. It is interesting to notice in them the intermingling of Chinese feeling, traditional brushwork and western perspective. A rare example of forerunner for this kind of paintings in oil on canvas is a large panel - watercolour on silk – originally with a painted narrow black border, meant to be installed in an English house (fig. 2.4). However, the influence of Dutch and English paintings and prints of the mid-18th century is evident in a Chinese landscape in oil on canvas, possibly by Spoilum (fig. 2.5).

Another favourite subject matter for oil paintings was related to various aspects of Chinese culture and domestic life. Westerners were interested in these themes, because the restriction imposed by Chinese authorities gave them little opportunity to observe the Chinese in their environment and usual daily life. Many paintings were executed in sets of four, as they often represented different scenes during the four seasons of the year (fig. 2.6).

The same subjects of domestic and social life were represented in watercolours and gouaches, which were more avidly purchased, because of their convenient size and relatively low price. Watercolours could also be bound in albums or book form for easier transportation and viewing. Little is known about the earliest watercolourists (1720-1760s). The Chinese style is still evident in the general flat appearance, though figures present a degree of modelling, and buildings, landscapes and backgrounds are in perspective. An example of this style is given by a set of four watercolours of Dutch merchants supervising the purchasing, packing and weighing of tea (fig. 2.7).

Very common subjects are the growing and processing of tea, making and decorating of porcelain, production of silk, cultivation of rice. These watercolours explained to westerners the processes involved in the manufacture of exotic products sent to the West. On this regard, it is worth pointing out that Chinese painters also fulfilled the needs of the westerners for a 'fantasy China'. For instance, as can be seen in a set of views showing the whole process from the making of porcelain from clay to the transportation of the finished product to Canton (fig. 2.8), the manufacture was depicted with a generally faithful rendering of the actual techniques involved, but in

an unfaithful setting, reducing to the appearance of gentle crafts what were intensive industries.

Natural history and botanical watercolours were very appreciated by westerners for their realistic rendering and attention to details. In *Foreign Rose*, and *Flowering White Cabbage* (fig. 2.9, a-b), from a set of botanical watercolours dating back to about 1760, the composition and palette as well as the method of rendering rocks and signalling the "sky" by unpainted areas of the paper, are well within the bounds of the conservative treatment given to botanical subjects.

Peculiar export products were paintings on glass. They were executed on the back of the glass, which was imported from Europe. Chinese artists preferred clear glass to mirror glass, because the thicker plate of mirror glass modified the colours. They generally used oil paints. When painting upon mirror glass, the artist first traced the outlines of his design, then, removed the amalgam of tin and mercury where necessary with a special steel tool, to have a clear space for the painting. This particular technique was introduced from Europe by the religious missionaries who were at the imperial court in Peking during the 17th and 18th centuries. A watercolour on paper illustrates an artist painting a reverse painting on glass from an English print (fig. 2.10). This is an important document showing the execution of this kind of works of art. The artist sits at a typical Chinese table on which are the papers for drying brushes, a palette, a container for water, and an easel holding a framed western print. The reverse glass painting rests face down on the table. The picture being created is in reverse of the print, as it can be seen by the direction of the tree branches.

During the production period from 1750 to 1840s different subjects were executed on glass. At first, landscapes with or without figures and portraits in Chinese or western taste prevailed. Figures were usually well defined and integrated into the landscape backdrops. A specimen shows an Englishman sitting in a plank back English chair, with his arms leaning on a table, on which are a Chinese vase and dish with flowers and fruits (fig. 2.11). Two ornate Chinese columns support an enormous blue drapery, which forms a tent-like ceiling. Beyond the columns is a classic Chinese landscape. The result is a curious composition of strangely juxtaposed Chinese and western elements. Other examples, such as *Pair of Lovers* (fig. 2.12), represent well-to-do Chinese men and women leading a life of ease and pleasure, seated in attitudes of aristocratic passivity in a garden or pastoral landscape.

From the 1780s the trend of copying European and American prints on glass, which was then framed in the western style but in frames of Chinese manufacture,⁶ was in vogue. Crossman suggests that the westerners' interest in reverse painting on glass was probably a reflection of the popularity in Europe and America of transfer prints fixed to the back of glass.⁷ Thanks to the ability of Chinese artists it was possible to obtain colourful and fine painting directly on glass, instead of having only a transferred etching or engraving. The subjects of copied prints were mythological, political, religious, literary, and historical. For instance, portraits of Washington were very popular with glass painters in Europe, America, as well as in China, and it is often difficult to identify and distinguish those produced in China from the others (fig. 2.13). The portraits painted by Chinese artists were copied from an original by Gilbert Stuart executed in oil on canvas before 1802, which found its way to China, probably taken there by a trader. All the copies are very faithful, sometimes of the same size of the Stuart's original. Chinese carvers and gilders even cleverly copied the wide gold frame of Stuart's painting.

Because of their historical and artistic importance, their rarity, and the skill required to execute them, reverse paintings on glass, together with the whole production of Chinese export painting, should finally receive the attention and appreciation they deserve.

⁶ Before this date the frames were European, especially of English manufacture.

⁷ Cf. Carl Crossman, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

Illustrations

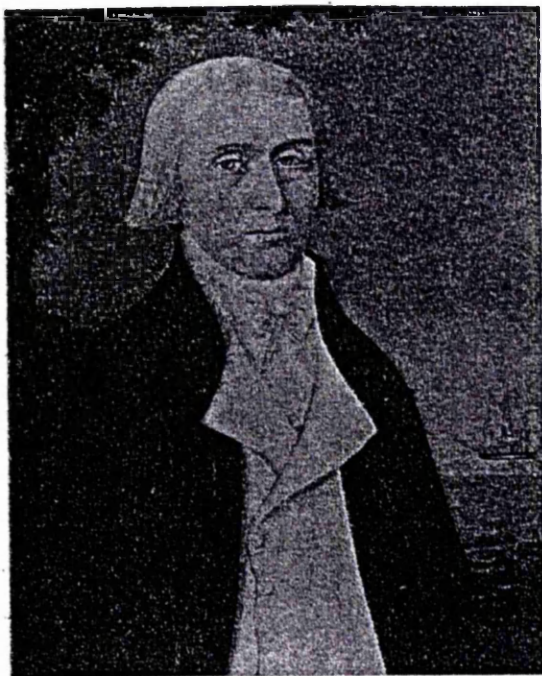


Figure 2. 1 Spoilum, *Captain Benjamin Smith*. Oil on primed fabric. 1790. 68.6 x 50.8 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

a



b

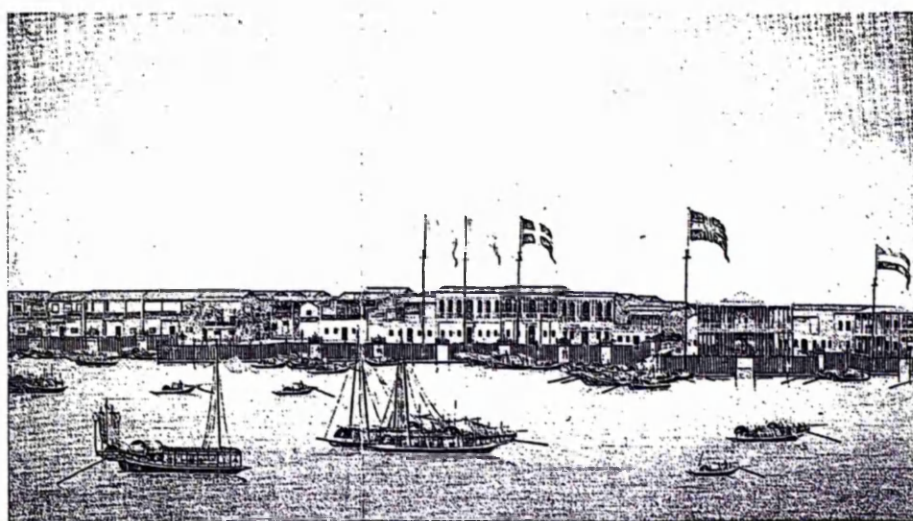


Figure 2. 2 a) William Daniell, *The European Factories at Canton in China*. Large folio hand-coloured aquatint. After 1785. Peabody Museum of Salem, Massachusetts. b) Unknown Chinese artist, *The Canton Waterfront*. Watercolours on silk, ca. 1760-1780. 53.3 x 32.4 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

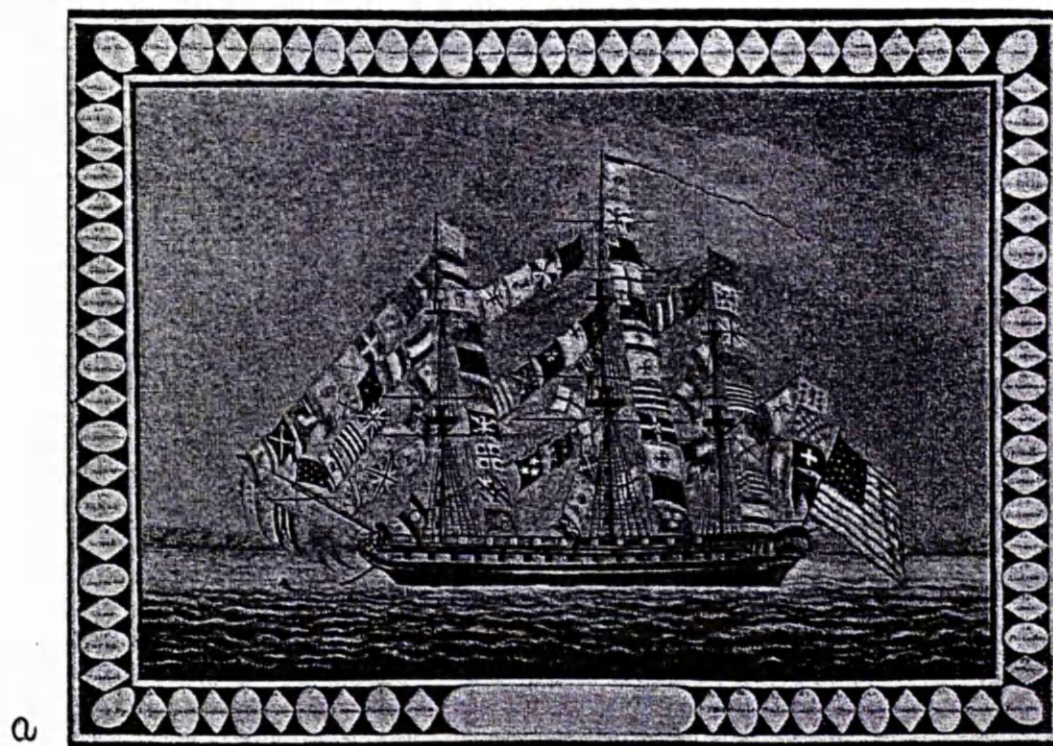


Figure 2. 3 a) Spoilum, *United States*. Oil on canvas, ca. 1800. 38.2 x 50.8 cm. Collection of Peter Hill. b) Unknown western artist, *Merchant Ship*. Oil on canvas, ca. 1790. 59.7 x 78.1 cm. Philadelphia Maritime Museum.

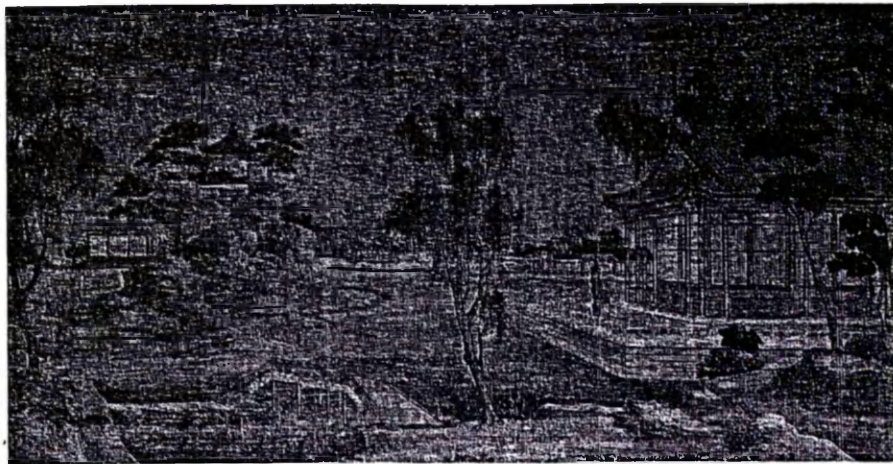


Figure 2. 4 Unknown Chinese artist, Chinese garden scene. Watercolours on silk, ca. mid-18th century. 122 x 259.2 cm. Collection of Mr and Mrs Michael Tracey.



Figure 2. 5 Spoilum or his circle, Chinese landscape. Oil on canvas, ca. 1800. 63.5 x 94 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

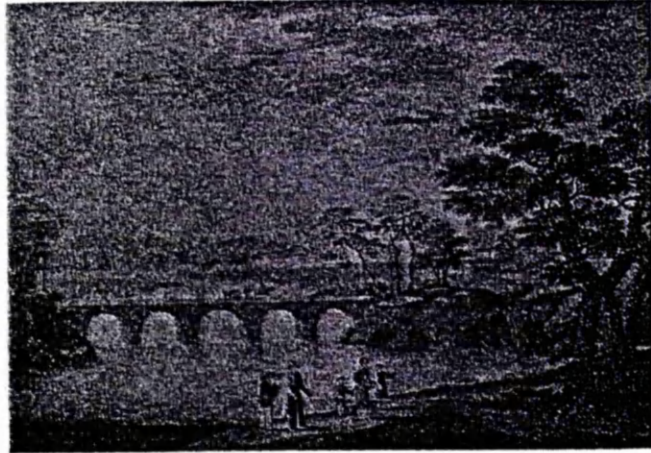


Figure 2. 6 Unknown Chinese artist, *Summer* and *Winter*. Two of a set of four. Oil on canvas. Early 19th century. 66.8 x 94 cm, 74.7x111 cm respectively. Private collection.

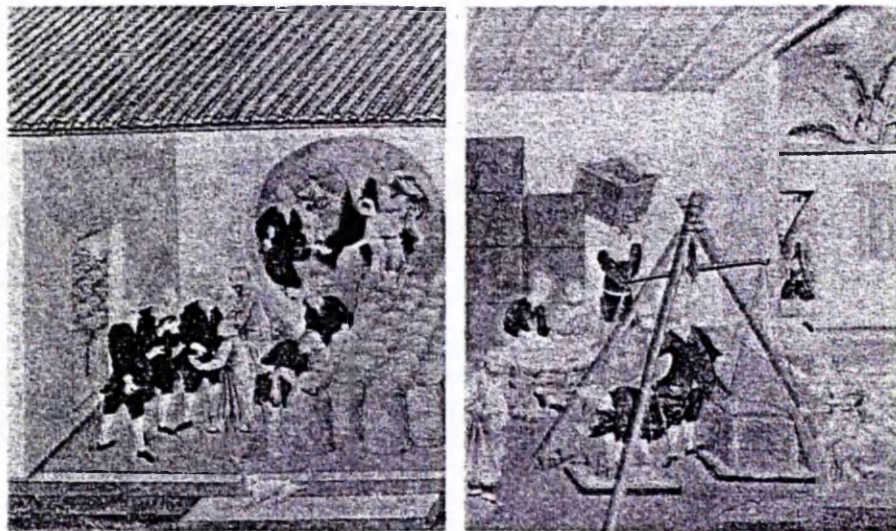


Figure 2. 7 Unknown Chinese artist, western merchants purchasing tea at Canton and western merchants weighing tea chests. Two of a set of four. Watercolours on paper. 1780. 33 x 22.9 cm. Private collection.

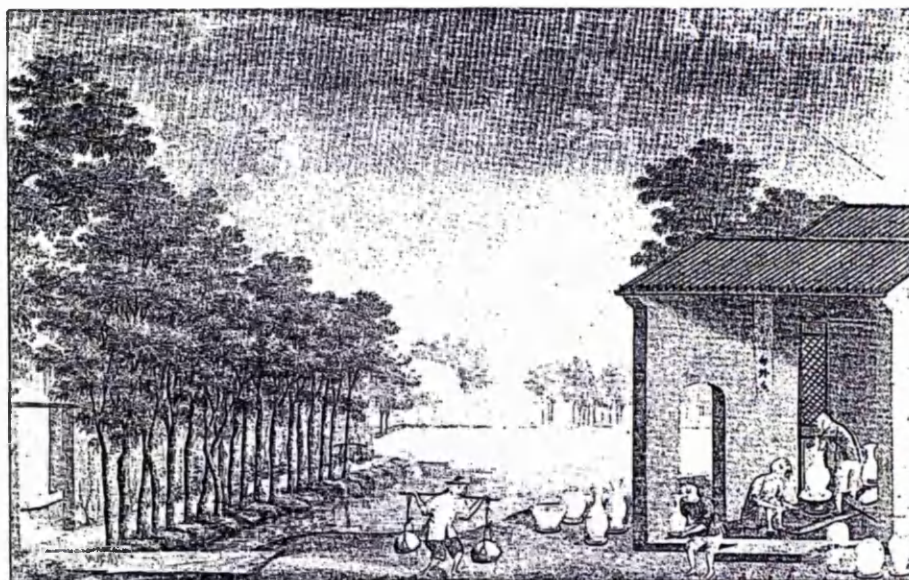


Figure 2. 8 Unknown Chinese artist, *Throwing porcelain on the wheel*. One of a set. Watercolours on paper, ca. 1770-1790. 59.2 x 38.7 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum.

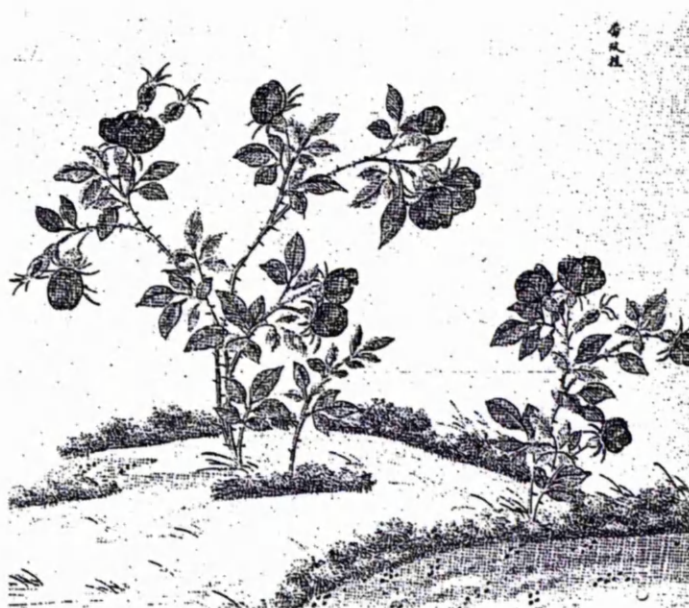


Figure 2. 9 Unknown Chinese artist, *Foreign Rose* and *Flowering White Cabbage*. Two of a set of twenty-four. Watercolours on paper, ca. 1760. 26.4 x 29.6 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 2. 10 Unknown Chinese artist, artist copying a European print on to glass. Watercolours on paper, ca. 1790. 42 x 35 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 2. 11 Unknown Chinese artist, Englishman in a landscape. Reverse painting on glass, ca. 1749-1750. 75 x 49.8 cm. Collection of Richard Milhender.



Figure 2. 12 Unknown Chinese artist, *Pair of Lovers*. Reverse painting on glass, ca. 1760-1780. 43.7 x 28.7 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

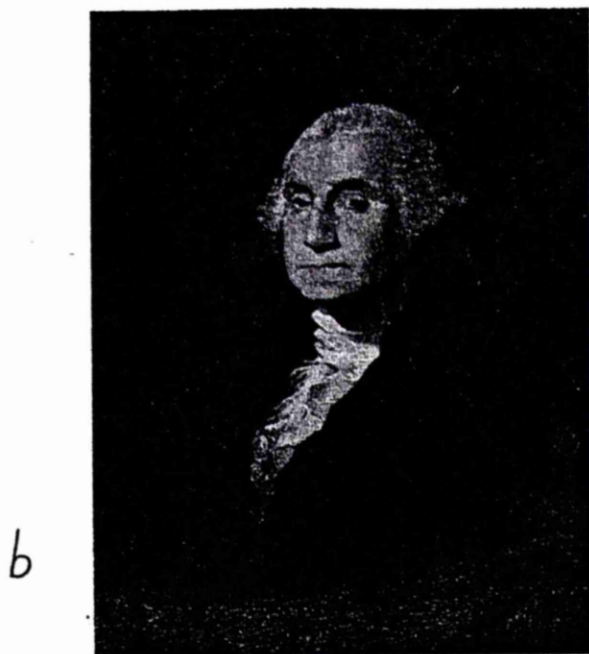


Figure 2. 13 a) Gilbert Stuart, *George Washington*. Oil on canvas. Before 1802. 73.6 x 61 cm. Collection of Mr and Mrs John B. Bunker. b) Unknown Chinese artist, *George Washington*. Reverse painting on glass. Before 1802. 98.3 x 79.7 cm. Private collection.

CHAPTER 3

CHINESE EXPORT WATERCOLOURS AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The British Museum holds a collection of 92 sets of Chinese export watercolours, acquired over a period of more than one hundred years. The first two sets entered the museum in 1860. Then, 46 sets were received together in 1877, as they were all part of the same donation.¹ A small number of sets were acquired at different times between the end of the 19th century and the first three decades of the 20th century. Two bigger groups of eight and nine sets respectively were included in the collection in 1944 and 1962, while the acquisition of the last set dates to 1976. Most of the acquisitions of the second half of the 20th century consist of items transferred from the British Library, which currently still possesses a few specimens.

The total of individual subjects amounts to approximately two thousand, because each set is made of a variable number of leaves. In the collection there are 20 complete 12-leaf series and six 24-leaf series. The other sets contain from a minimum of four leaves to a maximum of 159 leaves, and, in most cases, they are either fragmentary, or include different series, which are more or less complete.

The available records about the sets are summarised on individual cards usually reporting the registration number and date of acquisition, the title or description of the subject, the dimensions, the materials used, and the name of the donor, if applicable. For small series it is possible to find on the card a list of the leaves with the serial numbers and brief captions. At times, black and white photographs of some album leaves are also attached, and negative numbers are provided. No details are given about the artists, as they are mostly unknown. Rarely a very approximate indication for the period of execution is included.

It has to be noticed that the identification of each set is made difficult not only by the already scanty information available, but also by the fact that in many cases not all the data are entered on the cards. Sometimes the cards apart from containing the registration number and date of acquisition, are completely blank. Furthermore the details about the photographs are not always clearly stated, and it can even happen

¹ These sets were collected at Canton much earlier in the century by the Assistant Tea Inspector John Reeves. Part of the donation, with more albums, is now in the Natural History Museum, formerly a section of the British Museum. More details about John Reeves and his collection are given in the next chapter, p. 54.

that photographs from one album are erroneously attributed and attached to the records of another album.

The sets include both watercolours and ink drawings. However, they can generally be described as sets of watercolours, because the ink outlines were nothing else than preparations or models for the coloured versions.

Most of the specimens are in fairly good condition. The damaged ones present brittle paper and faded or altered colours.

The access to the sets – kept in the Stein Room of the British Museum – is relatively easy. However, in the course of this research, it has occurred that some albums have not been found immediately, because there were no records of their actual location, or there was no note of the fact that they had been moved to the Department of Conservation to be restored.

These export paintings are kept in the form of both bound albums and loose leaves. In many instances, as the images are not sequentially linked, it is not possible to establish whether they were ordered one after the other according to a specific criterion. In some other instances - especially in the series describing a whole process, or a group of events in temporal succession – a logical sequence of the illustrations can be recognised. In these circumstances it appears evident that the order of the leaves even in some bound albums is not correct. According to Wing-yui Wong, conservator at the British Museum, specialised in eastern art on paper or silk, the mistakes were made when sequential numbers were given to the leaves, as they entered the museum's collection.²

Despite the lack of more detailed information and the inadequacies of the museum's records, these export watercolour sets retain an intrinsic value as artistic and historical documents. Although there are thousands of similar specimens spread all over the world, the British Museum's collection emerges as one of the most comprehensive, covering all sorts of different themes.

Eight sets portray scenes of various Chinese landscapes and views of Canton, in order to give an idea of the aspect of different areas of the country to the western public. Particularly numerous are the depictions of Canton, Macao, Hong Kong, Whampoa and the Pearl River, the most familiar places to foreign merchants, since these were also the only ones where they were initially allowed to circulate for their

² An interesting conversation with Mr Wing-yui Wong took place in the autumn 2001, during a visit to the Department of Conservation to view some damaged albums.

transactions. Among the port views, the most popular was the image of the Canton waterfront, usually representing the imposing European-style buildings of the foreign quarter, all aligned in the background, and all kinds of western and Chinese craft crowding the river, in the foreground. As many scholars have pointed out, what is interesting about the Canton views is the fact that the painters “depicted the rapidly-changing waterfront at many different stages in its development”³ and, for this reason, they are relatively easy to date.

A group of five sets depicts ships and boats, another theme that, as the previous one, is always commented on in the publications about Chinese export watercolours, and is widely represented also in paintings in oil on canvas. In this regard, it can be noticed that, while the oil paintings usually portray western vessels, the watercolour leaves mainly represent Chinese shipping, since the principal purpose of these sets was to illustrate typical Chinese subjects.

Each leaf is occupied by a broadside ship portrait, which is generally rendered in a careful way. The representations include ships and boats for all sorts of uses: among the others, there are official boats for mandarins, barges for the transportation of goods, and boats for particular celebrations and ceremonies.

With 12 sets, the group concerning various Chinese figures and costumes is one of the biggest in the collection. Each album leaf contains a single figure, usually with no background at all. The figures include dignitaries and officials wearing their traditional robes, gymnastics and acrobats, women musicians, ladies and gentlemen, and people from different Chinese provinces.

As Craig Clunas observes, figure subjects remained one of the staples of Chinese export painting throughout the 19th century.⁴ This kind of figure painting was not new to Chinese artists. During the second half of the 18th century many volumes depicting westerners and people – especially trades and artisans – of the ethnic minorities from Chinese peripheral provinces were executed in order to provide the Chinese themselves with instructions in the ways and appearance of unfamiliar foreigners. An example is the series of about 600 images commissioned by emperor

³ See Patrick Conner, *the Sze Yuan Tang Collection of China Coast Paintings and The Wallem Collection of China Coast Ship Portraits*, Hong Kong, Orientations Publications, 1997, p. 13.

⁴ See Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984, p. 49.

Qianlong (1736-1796) in 1751, with the title *Illustrations of the Tributary Peoples of the Magnificent Qing Dynasty* (Huang Qing zhigong tu 皇清支贡图).⁵

Among the most appreciated Chinese export watercolours there were natural history drawings, of which the British Museum holds seven sets. Illustrations of birds, flowers, plants, fruits, insects and fish are traced with scientific rigour and precision, and the foreign purchasers particularly praised the realistic effect and the meticulous technique of these paintings, which were very useful to the studies of western scholars in the flora and fauna of the Far East. The critics generally recognise that the long tradition of natural history painting dating back to the Song dynasty and beyond accounts for the great ability of Chinese artists in dealing with this subject.⁶ The presence of already well-established rules and conventions about this specific kind of painting made the Chinese style particularly distinctive. In this regard, Mildred Archer states that the Chinese artists “preserved certain Chinese idioms which differentiate their work” from similar natural paintings executed by Indian artists under British commission around the same time. She also mentions some of the distinctive characteristics of Chinese natural paintings, compared with the Indian ones, such as softness of texture, more shiny surface, less wiry line, more delicate and sinuous curving lines, softer shading and more elaborate and decorative compositions.⁷

Having little opportunity to observe the Chinese at home, westerners often commissioned albums depicting scenes of domestic life. In the five sets about this theme preserved at the British Museum, most of the illustrations reflect certain standard subjects, which often occurred in oil paintings, too. The represented activities take place both in domestic interiors and gardens, and include popular occupations and entertainments, such as playing cards or other games, playing musical instruments, studying, catching butterflies, arranging plants and flowers, drinking tea, paying visits. Although the images tend to be somewhat idealised, and the scenes are set in a quite idyllic context, they provide some information about the

⁵ A recent edition of this work was published in 1991 (Shenyang, Liaosheng shushe 辽省书社).

⁶ Cf. Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984, p. 84.

⁷ See Mildred Archer, *Natural History Drawings in the India Office Library*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962, p. 61.

Chinese way of life, and are "excellent...studies of Chinese household furniture and accessories".⁸

Akin to this group of export watercolours, there are four sets showing different amusements of the everyday life. There are series of leaves illustrating acrobatics and circus acts performed on the streets, all sorts of gambling games and women's entertainments.

Theatrical performances also were a popular form of entertainment at all social levels. Thus, not surprisingly, four albums representing scenes of famous operas are included among the watercolour sets of the British Museum. The models of these depictions are once again indigenous ones. As a matter of fact, a large-scale production of theatrical prints to be circulated among the Chinese public with both educational and leisurely intent was launched early in the 18th century, being inspired by traditional paintings of previous times and, then, blossoming out in the 19th century.⁹

Of a more austere, serious character are two other groups of sets in the British Museum's collection. One is made of three sets depicting soldiers and military exercises. The other contains rather gruesome images – distributed in five sets – of Chinese methods of punishment, which exercised a special fascination on the foreign public. Of course, in the past, torture has been commonly practised in many countries across Europe as a 'judicial' instrument to extract evidence from the accused, and to punish criminals. However, it seems that Chinese laws during imperial times allowed a variety of particularly macabre and 'elaborated' punishments and methods of execution,¹⁰ as it clearly appears in the crude and realistic illustrations of the export albums.

The content of four other sets is not focused on a specific theme. Each series shows miscellaneous subjects, variously including furniture, lanterns, pagodas, plants, flowers, birds and shipping.

Besides all the themes presented above, there are still four, treated in four of the biggest groups of the collection. More precisely, ten sets deal with the production processes of typical Chinese goods; twelve sets represent the countless activities of

⁸ As described by Carl Crossman in his *The Decorative Art of the China Trade*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1991, p. 159.

⁹ For a discussion of the development and contents of theatrical prints see John Lust, *Chinese Popular Prints*, Leiden, New York, Köln, E. J. Brill, 1996, pp. 222-224.

¹⁰ An account of various Chinese tortures and punishments can be found in Leon Comber, "Crime and Punishment in Old China", in *Orientations*, October 1973, pp. 37-42.

Chinese artisans and merchants; six sets illustrate the complex picture of Chinese religious systems and beliefs; eight sets describe the Chinese way of celebrating particular occurrences and festivities. These four extensive topics, here only briefly mentioned, deserve, in fact, a detailed and deep examination. Usually only superficially treated by scholars, they are thoroughly discussed in the following chapters, as they provide essential keys in the investigation of the impact of Chinese export watercolours on the foreign public, and their influence on the western idea of China in the 18th and 19th centuries.

CHAPTER 4

PRODUCTION ACTIVITIES

The British Museum's collection of Chinese export paintings includes 12 sets – some complete, some others fragmentary – representing the different stages of specific production activities of South China. This theme has been relatively widely discussed, for it was one of the staples of the painting workshops in Canton, approximately between 1780 and 1840. However, the various comments all tend to be focused on the same aspects and characteristics, thus suggesting very similar ideas.

The analysis of the specimens preserved at the British Museum makes it possible to confirm the generally held opinions about them, but also allows one to come to some further conclusions.

The western curiosity about the production processes of such “exotic” goods as tea, porcelain and silk was chiefly aroused by the fact that Western people wanted to know more about these unfamiliar and high quality products, which were the most important Chinese exports to Europe. Although from the late 18th century the development of this subject matter for export painting was dictated by the demands of foreign purchasers, it is important to notice that Chinese artists were not new to these kind of depictions. As a matter of fact, scenes of production activities can be spotted throughout the entire history of Chinese painting.

Some of the earliest examples can be found on the painted bricks and walls of tombs (fig. 4.1) dated back to the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220) and to the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-265). Speaking of a tomb in Gansu province, placed by archaeologists sometime between A.D. 220 and 316, Zhang Anzhi reports that “there are more than 200 bricks painted with bricks involving production, such as ‘winnowing’, ‘herding sheep and cattle’, ‘collection of mulberry leaves’, ‘horse grazing’, ‘oxen pulling a plough’.”¹ At that time there were at least two main reasons for making such paintings. The pictorial tiles generally decorated the burial chambers of powerful and wealthy people. Hence, on the one hand, the depiction of production activities, and all their fields, properties, servants meant that all the possessions of the deceased were accompanying them in order to provide after death all the

¹ Cf. Zhang Anzhi, *A History of Chinese Painting*, Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1992, p. 35.



comforts and luxuries they had enjoyed while alive. On the other hand, such representations were used by the relatives of the deceased to document the wealth and achievements of their family.

Even during the Tang dynasty (618-907), at the time when the major theme of painting involved aristocratic life and courtly entertainments, the court artist Zhang Xuan, active in the first half of the 8th century and specialising in pictures of palace ladies, depicted a scene of silk making in the women's quarters of the palace (fig. 4.2). The handscroll, which only survives in the form of a copy by the Song dynasty emperor Huizong (r. 1101-1125),² shows the beating, sewing, and ironing of new silk, performed by court ladies. Doubts about the purpose and subject of this painting are raised by the fact that the choice and arrangement of these three specific steps in the whole process seem to follow more aesthetic criteria than a logical presentation of a narrative sequence. Wu Tung suggests two sources of inspiration for the depiction of aristocratic ladies engaged in activities normally performed by peasants.³ The scroll may refer to either the courtly ritual performed every spring, in which the empress and the palace ladies perform all the stages of silk production, or to a poem by Xie Huilian (397-433) describing women preparing silk clothes to be sent to their beloved fighting at the frontier. In both cases, it may be possible that the original version by Zhang Xuan included other steps represented in a more sequential order, and that – as it was common practice in the Song period – the copyist selected only the scenes he considered more interesting from an artistic point of view.

However, it is with the development of genre painting in the Song dynasty (960-1179) that production and commercial activities became one of the painters' favourite subjects. A lively picture on silk of the Southern Song dynasty (1128-1279) represents in one scene the intense, busy life of the farmers, and illustrates all the steps of the agricultural cycle, from ploughing and sowing to storing crops into the granary (fig. 4.3). Another example is a silk scroll of the same period, on which sericulture is depicted in 24 stages, from raising silkworms to weaving silk (fig. 4.4). In this case, the activities are separated one from the other, and are accompanied by brief descriptions written under each image. Apart from the outdoors operation of

² As Michael Sullivan argues, the painting attributed to emperor Huizong is "more likely a product of his palace studio: it is hard to imagine the emperor having the time to make replicas of this sort, although he often put his name to them". See Michael Sullivan, *The Arts of China*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1984, p/ 129.

³ For a discussion about this handscroll, see Wu Tung, *Tales from the Land of Dragons*, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1997, pp. 141-143.

picking mulberry leaves, all the other tasks are carried out in different rooms divided by walls and columns. One side of the rooms is completely opened to the viewer, so that it is possible to see what is happening inside.

Furthermore, the numerous encyclopaedic publications of Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties paid great attention to agriculture and workshop practices, which were profusely illustrated by means of woodcuts, as can be seen from the 23 woodcuts illustrating silk production in the 1697 edition of the imperial encyclopaedia *Gengzhitu* (fig. 4.5).

Despite their different structure, all these compositions appear as connected series of operations, following the same criterion that underlies the execution of the export watercolours about production activities of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The sets of album leaves at the British Museum entered the collection in different periods, as precise dates clearly show, but only an extremely vague indication - if any at all - about the time of their execution is provided. Yet, from their features and the comparison with other better dated sets, it is possible to estimate that the earliest were produced at the end of the 18th century, while the latest belong to the middle of the 19th century.

In order to discuss these works in detail, it is most convenient to group them according to the product described.

Tea

The largest group, which includes five sets, is the one concerning the cultivation and production of tea.

The set classified as Add. (abbreviation for Additional Chinese Painting⁴) 392a is a complete series of 24 leaves. According to the records of the museum, in 1976 it was transferred from the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books of the British Library.⁵ More precisely, it originally belonged to the Early Collections

⁴ Paintings with this denomination were acquired by the museum after Arthur Waley had studied and numbered the paintings in the British Museum up to ca. 1925).

⁵ Mention of this and other similar transfers is made in the Classed Inventory of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Library.

Lansdowne and Egerton, the materials of which had been gathered approximately between 1753 and 1825.

An early date for this album – presumably executed around 1800 – is also suggested by the accurate draughtsmanship, typical of the first export watercolours of the late 18th century. The drawings present a delicate ink outline, and well-defined, bright colours with shading. The prevailing colour is green, accompanied by grey and brown. Brilliant tones of red, blue and green are sparingly used for small parts and objects like ribbons, hats and bowls. Earrings and hairpins worn by the women are traced with gold pigment.

Landscape and architecture in the background are briefly sketched and highly stylised, suggested by sequences of variously arranged dots and lines. The drawing does not follow the rules of western perspective, but the space is rendered in the traditional Chinese way, with different views and foci juxtaposed in the same scene. Hence, the slanting lines of the table in the first leaf do not converge in the distance, but run parallel, and the furnaces in the seventeenth leaf are depicted as simultaneously seen from above and in side-view (fig. 4.6). Figures are meticulously depicted, characterised by rounded bodies and elegant movements. The soft, loose, somewhat fluttering folds of the clothing echo techniques of the Tang dynasty, when painters and sculptors were particularly occupied with the rendering of volume and action.

Both men and women are involved in the tea production, but they perform different tasks and are shown in separate groups.

There are no descriptive captions on any of the leaves, which are of a medium size (34.7 x 37 cm). The only inscriptions in the album are the two characters *xin lin* 馨霖 ('persistent rain of strong fragrance') on the fourth leaf, which refer to a quality of tea with a strong and pervasive fragrance, and the four characters *jianxuan xichun* 揀選熙春 that are being written on big baskets, meaning "selected hyson".⁶

Like this example, albums about production activities datable to the late 18th century and early 19th century are mostly of small or medium dimensions, and contain more leaves – usually 24 – than the later ones. On the other hand, the peculiarity of this set

⁶ Hyson is a variety of Chinese green tea made from thinly rolled and twisted leaves. The transliteration derives from the Cantonese pronunciation 'heicheun', which stands for the Mandarin 'xichun', literally meaning 'bright spring'.

lies in the choice of represented scenes. As a matter of fact, while in most instances, both earlier and later than the set under discussion, the description of the tea production includes the various steps from the growing of tea plants to the transport to the warehouse, and the packing in crates for shipping to the West,⁷ in this instance, all the 24 leaves are focused on the processing of tea itself. Thus, the illustrated stages are: picking tea leaves; sorting, drying, pounding and firing⁸ the tea leaves; preparing boxes and packing tea on the production site. However, they are not arranged in a sequential order, and some of them are repeated in two or more scenes with slight variations. This characteristic, also noticed in other sets of the collection, gives the impression that sometimes the albums were executed almost mechanically, copying and combining illustrations from other sets, without paying attention to the logical succession of the different steps in the production process.

Another set of 24 leaves is Add. 221 (fig. 4.7), donated to the museum by Miss W. M. Giles in 1946.

The leaves, which measure 39.2 x 50.5 cm, are not bound in album form, but are kept loose in a random order. Although they are presented together, they actually form two separate albums of 12 leaves each, describing similar steps of the tea production. Both series start with the cultivation of tea plants (fig.4.7, a-b), and in both of them women appear in some scenes, mainly involved in the selection of tea leaves, while men carry out all the other tasks. Each leaf is numbered, thus completing two sequences from 1 to 12. The numbers are written on small rectangular slips of paper vertically attached in the lower right corner of the leaf. A brief description of each scene in Chinese – or rather Cantonese – is also included on these slips. Only one of the leaves has lost its descriptive inscription. However, observing the represented scene, it is easy to understand that this leaf is the 12th and final leaf of one of the two series. The same image often occurs in other albums⁹ and depicts one of the last stages of the whole process: tea is being tramped into chests before being weighed and shipped (fig.4.7, c). A different image, but also commonly found elsewhere,

⁷ See, for example, an album dated 1780-90, at the Victoria and Albert Museum, presented by Craig Clunas in his *Chinese Export Watercolours*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984, pp. 23-27, and an album dated ca. 1850, described in the exhibition catalogue *Canton and the China Trade*, London, Martyn Gregory, 1986, p. 32.

⁸ The word 'firing' used in this context refers to the procedure of crisping the tea leaves by fire.

⁹ Two versions of a similar image are illustrated in C. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1991, pp. 176 and 441. The two leaves belong to two albums dated ca 1790-1800, and ca. 1820 respectively.

closes the other 12-leaf series of Add. 221: tea is transported on the river probably to Canton (fig.4.7, d).

Some elements seem to indicate that the date of execution is somewhat later than that of the previous set, around 1810-1820. Although the ink drawing is generally accurate, less attention is given to the facial features, which are rendered by using more schematic lines. Figures are either particularly slender and tall – especially women – or shorter, but with their Chinese appearance only hinted by slightly elongated eyes. The difference in the treatment of figures also suggests that they were executed by different artists.

The colours of people and buildings in the foreground are very bright, with the predominance of blue, while those in the background are lighter. Despite the use of shading and a more conscious observance of the rules of Western perspective, the overall effect is still rather flat.

The remaining three sets about tea production are all a donation by Miss Reeves, between 1877 and 1878. Miss Reeves was the daughter of John Reeves, who arrived in Canton in 1812 as Assistant Tea Inspector, and remained on the China coast, with two breaks, until 1831. He sent back to Britain thousands of drawings and watercolours, many of which depicted botanical and zoological subjects. Since most of the works were personally commissioned by John Reeves from local artists, sometimes in a lower corner of the leaves there is stamped the coat of arms of the Reeves family. Peter Whitehead explains that, since the design of the coat of arms changed in 1826, it can be used as indicator for the date of execution.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, some of the leaves in the sets under discussion bear the form with the dragon's head on a mural crown, which was the one used until 1826. Consequently, they cannot be later than that date.

The 14 leaves registered with the number Ch. Ptg. (abbreviation for Chinese Painting) 413 Folder 15 (fig. 4.8) are drawn with ink on paper. No colours are used at all, and only the ink outline is traced, without shading, thus showing that maybe these drawings are unfinished or were meant to be master copies for other similar drawings.

¹⁰ Information about John Reeves and the fish and natural history drawings in his collection can be found in two publications by P. J. P. Whitehead: 'The Reeves Collection of Chinese Fish Drawings', in the *Bulletin of the British Museum (Natural History)*, 1969, vol. 3, n. 7; *Chinese Natural History Drawings*, London, British Museum (natural History), 1974.

Thirteen of the leaves (fig. 4.8, a) measure 38.5 x 50 cm, and bear Cantonese descriptive inscriptions in the lower right corner, and English inscriptions added later are centred at the bottom of the page. They present stylised and geometrical images, which have lost their Chinese character almost completely. The use of western perspective is stressed by the slanting lines of the buildings and on the ground. No great attention is paid to the individual features of the figures, which appear schematic and only functional to describe a certain activity. Some stages of the growing of tea plants and the preparation of tea are depicted, but it is likely that initially there were 24 leaves, almost half of which are now missing.

One of the 14 leaves of the set measures only 37.2 x 29 cm and does not bear any inscription. The style of execution is clearly different from that of the previous album. The drawing, which shows a man watering tea plants, is even more essential and schematic, with the landscape in the background vaguely suggested by a few small bushes in the distance. The linear and somewhat stiff way of depicting the peasant highlights the influence of the style of some Ming and Qing woodblock prints (fig. 4.9).

By comparing the characteristics of the groups, it is evident that of the 14 leaves, 13 belong to the same set, and only one is left of another set.

Also incomplete is the set classified as Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 3 (fig. 4.10). The six leaves, which measure 39.2 x 45 cm and bear no inscriptions, only represent scenes of picking, drying and roasting tea leaves, examining samples and filling chests.

The colours – among which, blue, purple, brown, grey and green prevail – are bright and thick with shading. Chinese perspective is mostly used: the surfaces of tables and furnaces are showed from the top. The figures are all men and have a full, round shape. The background is described with few essential elements: bare walls to indicate indoor scenes; sky and stylised trees to indicate open-air activities.

As the use of tea was becoming more and more popular in the West, particularly in England, in the 18th century, the curiosity about the enigmatic plant from which this exotic drink was prepared also increased, and even botanical experts were sent to China to investigate its origins and production. This search also had economical reasons, for it aimed at introducing the tea plant to India. Eventually, the move succeeded, and the British preference for Indian teas brought about the decline of the China tea trade, at the end of the 19th century.

A substantial contribution to the knowledge of the tea plant was given by the Scot Robert Fortune, who was sent to China as a botanical collector for the Horticultural Society in London, in 1842. In his account of the visits to the 'tea countries of China', together with all sorts of information about agriculture, horticulture and botany, he also gives a meticulous description of the culture of the tea plant and a map of the best tea-production districts. Furthermore, following his observations in Fujian, he was able to explain in a very detailed way all the stages to obtain green and black tea. The leaves, picked in April and May into round baskets, were dried and tossed with a bamboo brush. Then, they were gathered in the shape of small bread dough, and exposed to the open air. At this point, the leaves that were destined to produce green tea were dried in a sieve over a slow fire, while those aimed at becoming black tea were tossed in a pan over a charcoal fire. In the end, after being sorted, the leaves were packed and transported to the warehouses.¹¹ This description, not only highlights Fortune's rigorous research, but also the accuracy of the British Museum's albums depicting the tea production. The correspondence is so apparent that Fortune's words could be used as captions for many of the illustrations.

The same precision in the representation of the steps of the production can be found in other albums, the comparison of which helps to recognise different styles in different periods. For example, early albums (between the late 18th century and ca. 1810), similar to some of the leaves of Add. 221, are characterised by the presence of more buildings with Chinese-style features and stronger emphasis on the figures, usually quite short but of big proportions, if compared with the other elements (fig. 4.11). On the other hand, landscapes more open into the distance, and taller and thinner figures, often of small proportions, as they both appear in Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 3 and in other leaves of Add. 221, are generally associated with albums of later dates. Two rare excellent instances are a set signed by Sun Qua and dated ca. 1843, and an album of the mid-19th century signed by You Qua (fig. 4.12).¹²

The almost fantastic peaks of a scene of Add. 221 and the craggy mountains shown in the background on the right side of scene of Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 3 are meant to suggest the scenery of some parts of South China. These characteristics of the

¹¹ Cf. Robert Fortune, *Two Visits to the Tea Countries of China and the British Tea Plantations in the Himalaya*, London, John Murray, 1852, volume II, pp. 232-246.

¹² A list and tentative chronology of the Chinese painters working for the western market in Canton is given by C. Crossman in *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1991, pp. 406-407.

landscape are sometimes rendered in a more spectacular way when the tea process is represented in oil on canvas. In such peculiar paintings, all the activities are summarised in one unreal scene, where the emphasis is on the natural element. It is the case of a painting in which the different stages of tea production are sequentially displayed along the winding course of a river (fig. 4.13): from the cultivation of the plant in the distance, to the loading of a large sampan with tea chests in the foreground. All the steps in the process are shown as they took place at the same time. Although this was not really the case, by creating such an illusion, it was possible to represent many subsequent stages in one image. The people involved in the production work are either in the open air or under thatched canopies without walls, so that what happens is clearly unfolded in front of the viewer. This device is very common also in the album leaves of the British Museum. However, the main difference between the two kinds of representation lies in the fact that in oil paintings the small figures, although clearly discernible, are inserted in imposing scenery, where a dense range of mountains and leafy trees are not simply a frame, but seem themselves essential protagonists.

It must be recognised that the tea production described by Cantonese artists through their drawings and watercolours appears precise and meticulous, yet too idyllic and idealised. On the other hand, the high value of these illustrations as educational and documentary materials cannot be surpassed by similar European pictures about the same theme. On this regard, it is worth considering some works of Auguste Borget, a French artist who spent ten months on the China coast in 1838-9, largely in Macau, in the course of his travels around the world.¹³ His hundreds of drawings of various aspects of Chinese life undoubtedly reveal great discernment, fluent draughtsmanship, and sense of liveliness. Ever curious and intrigued by the lively, crowded, narrow streets of Canton, and by the peaceful surroundings with their fascinating landscape, Borget was always ready to jot down impressions and observations, either in words or in sketches, about all what he saw. Customs, colours, architecture and tools are accurately described (fig. 4.14, a). However, because of the restrictions imposed by the Chinese authorities on foreigners' inland journeys, he was not allowed to travel too far away from the Canton and Macao area. Thus, when

¹³ Borget's travels in search of fresh inspiration for his artistic production lasted almost four years, from October 1836 to August 1840. Robin Hutcheon presents the artist's life and works in his *Souvenirs of Auguste Borget*, Hong Kong, South China Morning Post Ltd., 1979.

representing some scenes, he could only fill the gaps of his personal experience with the help of other people's accounts and his imagination. In his illustration of tea picking (fig. 4.14, b), the landscape and the posture of the figures remind more of a classic pastoral scene in a Western painting, than of the reality of the tea-producing districts of South China.

Interesting material for comparison are also some sketches published in the *Illustrated London News*, for they depict the production and trade of Chinese tea from the point of view of the western merchants. Two line engravings published in 1874 (fig. 4.15, a) illustrate British workmen at the East India Company warehouse at Crutchedfriars, in the City area of London, close to the Thames riverside and to the headquarters of the East India Company in Leadenhall Street. They are stamping down imported tea to crush the leaves into tiny particles, as they were commonly consumed, and emptying chests, to weigh the tea before repackaging it to be sold. All the process is accomplished following the same traditional practice of Chinese workmen, as it is often represented in export watercolours. Six printed vignettes published in 1888 (fig. 4.15, b) lampoon the far from busy life and none-too-onerous activities of a European tea-taster. These examples, directly inspired by the detailed scenes about the production of tea executed by Chinese artists, provide a clear evidence of the considerable adjustments and transformations that this frequent subject in Chinese export painting underwent when handled by western artists.

Porcelain

The second most conspicuous group among the production series album leaves at the British Museum is the one about the making of porcelain. This was a particularly sought-after subject, since for a long time westerners had been trying to identify the mysterious ingredients and the special treatments necessary to obtain such a fine and enchanting material as porcelain. As for the growing and processing of tea, every step from the digging of the raw clay to the fully accomplished porcelain object was described.

The 24 leaves of Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 18 were donated to the museum by Miss Reeves. The drawings are only in black ink on paper. What is striking of these scenes

is that the landscape, which is predominantly mountainous – or it would be better to define it as rocky – is rendered with thick and short strokes densely and sharply traced, while the outline of figures is traced with very thin but more curved and fluent lines (fig. 4.16). The overall effect is that of an inaccessible, inhospitable natural environment, where people are almost trapped and barely discernible. The austerity of the peaks recalls the hills and mountains surrounding the valley of Jingdezhen, in Jiangxi, from which the clay necessary for making porcelain is still obtained today.

Considering the schematic, impersonal features of the figures, the size of each leaf – 37.5 x 51 cm – and the arrangement of the composition, with Cantonese descriptive inscriptions in the lower right corner and the English translation centred at the bottom of the page, this set can be associated with the 13 leaves about tea production of Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 15. The 24 scenes don't seem to be in the correct order, for some stages of decorating and painting the pottery, which should immediately follow the moulding of pots and vases, are placed at the end of the series, after the packing and transport of final products.¹⁴

It is rather plausible that these drawings were executed in the early 19th century, as proposed in the British Museum's records. For the reason stated above regarding the donations by Miss Reeves, a date after 1831 would be unlikely.

Add. 220 (fig. 4.17) is another set of 24 leaves donated by Miss W. M. Giles in 1946. Many characteristics suggest that these watercolours were produced in the same period – between 1810 and 1820 – and by the same workshop responsible for the execution of the tea production leaves of Add. 221. A similar range of colours – in particular green, brown, blue and grey – are used, with the same technique of bright, strong colours in the foreground and light, pale colours in the background. The two sets are both framed by a dark blue line. Furthermore, this complete series of 24 stages, from the digging of the clay to the packing in Canton for shipment, also bears small rectangular slips of paper with progressive numbers and brief descriptions vertically attached in the lower right corner of the leaf. The leaves are quite large, each measuring 41 x 53 cm. The depiction of vegetation and mountains is apparently influenced by a traditional style of landscape painting. By the last quarter of the 18th

¹⁴ The right sequence of the various steps can be inferred from the description of other similar series, like the one illustrated in C. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1991, pp. 438-439.

century a plethora of engravings and drawings had been brought from Europe to China in order to be used as models for the decoration of works of art. Although the ever-growing record of western scenic conventions had a gradual and subtle influence upon the Cantonese artists, especially during the 19th century, the legacy of the ancient artistic tradition could not be cancelled altogether. Therefore, in this album, the way of dotting the foliage, the use of lines like small axe cut for the depiction of rocks, and the high distance (gaoyuan 高远) perspective adopted for the mountains are all methods represented in the widely consulted handbooks of Chinese painting.

Of particularly fine quality is another set about the production of porcelain. Of the 14 leaves, 12 (fig. 4.18, a), measuring 38 x 48 cm, form a complete series, while the remaining two (fig. 4.18, b), measuring 39 x 52.5 cm, belong to a different series now almost entirely lost. It has been difficult to identify these watercolours, because there is confusion about their classification. Actually, they don't seem to have their own classification number at all, and on the records of the British Museum, reproductions of some leaves accompany the description that, in fact, refers to Add. 220. Furthermore, the leaves are not bound together, but are in frames hung on sliding panels in the so-called Stein Room at the British Museum. According to the features recognised for these watercolours, they may have been executed at the end of the 18th century. All the elements in the scene – people, objects, plants, buildings are rendered in a very detailed way. The use of western perspective is well mastered; trees, rocks and streams are meticulously drawn and painted, cleverly combining principles and instructions of Chinese painting techniques with an accurate use of shading in the manner of western painting. Colours are generally bright and well balanced. Monotonous shades of pale grey and dark blue are only applied to clothes. Descriptive labels with Chinese characters are attached in the lower right corner.

The two additional leaves that are hung at the end of the complete series of 12 leaves represent the processes of enamelling and firing ware. It is evident that they are the work of a different hand, probably not as skilful. Colours are less tinged, with more sudden changes from one shade to another. Figures' proportions are bigger, with larger faces characterised by rough, big eyes and nose. Furthermore, less attention is paid to the rendering of buildings and landscape.

Besides all differences and similarities, the sets about the making of porcelain bear a common element: the workers involved in the production are all men, while women

are virtually absent. This can be indicative of the fact that, despite the pleasant settings displayed on the watercolours, the actual environment where porcelain was produced was a gloomy and tough one, and the general conditions of work were too hard to be endured by women. Only a slight hint of the pall of smoke coming up from the kilns, and of the poor, decaying state of the workshops can be detected in some leaves where thin columns of dark smoke, and buildings with cracked walls are represented. However, a few western travellers had the opportunity to witness the reality of the porcelain factories, and wrote accounts about what they were able to see. A meticulous description of the people, the city, the history and the ceramics of Jingdezhen can be found in two letters from Father d'Entrecolles to Father Orry, treasurer in Paris of the Chinese and Indian missions, sent respectively in 1712 and 1722. Father d'Entrecolles (1664-1741) went to China in 1698 and visited the famous porcelain-producing centre from time to time, while he was a missionary in Jiangxi. His account, apart from being precise, also contains vivid images of places and activities, like the one of whirling flames and smoke that appeared in front of the travellers approaching the city.¹⁵

Comparing the sets of the British Museum to other sets on the same subject, preserved elsewhere, there is once again confirmation of the phenomenon of better quality for the watercolours executed between 1770 and 1820, which show great attention to detail, complexity in composition, and careful handling of colours. Instead, those produced later in the 19th century are generally less accurate: the features of the figures become more approximate, the landscape is composed of a few essential elements, and the drawings appear more sketchy, as if to emphasise just the didactic importance of these album leaves, rather than any artistic value.

Among the examined watercolours, those that seem to emerge for superior painting technique and overall effect are the 12 leaves of the complete unclassified set. Especially the scene of pounding the clay is set in a quite suggestive, yet imaginary, landscape.

The monumentality of the natural environment is particularly stressed in some pictures about the manufacture of porcelain, executed in oil on canvas around 1800 (fig. 4.19). All the stages are usually displayed in a spatial-chronological sequence, from the digging of the clay in the mountains, in the upper left part, to the packing of

¹⁵ The original French version of the letters is reproduced by Stephen W. Bushell in the Appendix of his *Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1910, 181-222.

the finished ware for transportation to Canton, in the lower right part. The peculiarity of these representations lies in the fact that they are painted not only in a typical western medium, completely unfamiliar to the tradition of Chinese art, but also in a western romantic style, with bulky cloud formations and mountains horizontally stretching far away in the distance, giving a sense of depth. This setting is in sharp contrast with the Chinese features of people and buildings, and with the activities described, thus making the scene most unrealistic.

Silk and cotton

Silk was another good of which China had been the proud sole producer and exporter to the West for many centuries. Hence, it is not surprising to find albums depicting the production of this precious material. However, only one set about this subject is preserved in the British Museum's collection.

Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 17 includes 23 leaves: 14 about the silk industry (fig. 4.20, a), and nine – likely with another one missing – about the manufacture of cotton (fig. 4.20, b). This set was among the others donated by Miss Reeves in 1878. It doesn't bear any stamp of the Reeves' coat of arms, but by comparing it to Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 18 and Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 15, it is legitimate to assume that they were all executed by the same workshop, probably in the late 1820s. As previously stated with regard to the two sets about tea and porcelain production, the leaves on silk and cotton, measuring 38 x 52 cm, were also drawn in ink on paper, with a short Cantonese explanation in the lower right corner, and an English translation centred at the bottom. The attention is focused on activities and tools; the background is anonymous and unattractive, composed of some buildings and trees in a very schematic, elementary style. Figures appear slender, with smiling, relaxed faces. Women are mostly in charge of the manufacture of both silk and cotton; men only carry out secondary tasks, such as picking mulberry leaves and transporting burdens. In some instances it is possible to identify a striking connection between these series produced for a foreign market and the tradition of Chinese illustrations. This is the case with the scene of picking leaves from mulberry trees. Despite the simplified background and a few adjustments, the left part of the drawing is entirely similar to

the corresponding scene represented in one of the 23 woodcuts illustrating silk production in the 1697 edition of the imperial encyclopaedia *Gengzhitu* (fig. 4.5). The group of four people in the foreground is depicted with exactly the same postures and the same spatial arrangement in both occurrences. This shows that the Cantonese artists had an easy access to the traditional sources, and freely used them as reference material, perhaps in order to accelerate the whole process of execution of the export albums.

Sericulture originated in north-central China in the Neolithic Age, and from a very early stage, silk had been considered a prestigious product, which could even affect the determination of the hierarchy among the members of a community. Depending from the quality of the thread, the craftsmen who operated the reels were assigned to different positions in the social scale. The social level of those who spun raw silk was considered superior than that of those who produced refuse silk, a by-product of the manufacture of the finest silk, made from short lengths obtained from damaged cocoons or broken off during processing, twisted together to make yarn. The importance of sericulture is also proved by the images found on painted bricks and murals in tombs of different periods, an early example being a scene of picking mulberry leaves from one of the tombs of the Wei-Jin period (220-419) excavated at Jiayuguan, in Gansu (fig. 4.21).

Sets of export paintings about the manufacture of silk, from the various stages of growing the silkworms to the making up of a robe, or the packing of the finished product for export, were commonly executed, at least throughout the first half of the 19th century, including a few pictures in oil on canvas of the early 1800s. However, another peculiar aspect of the manufacture of this textile – seldom depicted – is the life cycle of the silkworms. On eight leaves of English paper watermarked 1805, all the stages of development of the silkworm larvae are meticulously represented: from tiny specks, they become long and fat, ready to spin cocoons on a specially constructed lattice (fig. 4.22). This group of watercolours is part of an album dated ca. 1806 – preserved at the British Library – which contains 116 drawings of fruit, vegetables, flowers, insects, amphibians, arthropods, reptiles and molluscs.

While it is easy to find various extant paintings about sericulture, sets about the manufacture of cotton are rather rare. The nine leaves of Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 17 well represent all the process, which starts with the picking of cotton seeds, and terminates with the spinning of the thread and weaving on the loom. Originally, the

series might have been closed by one more scene depicting the dyeing of the yarn, or the transportation of the cloth to the merchants. This is the case of a complete set of 12 paintings representing the growing and manufacturing of cotton, executed in gouache on paper, ca. 1800.¹⁶

Fortune's report of his visit to the cotton-producing areas of Shanghai and Ningbo provides evidence that foreigners were aware of the methods of cultivation and processing of Chinese cotton.¹⁷ However, the reason why this subject was not among the most popular ones is because such a product was not among the main Chinese exports to the West. On the contrary, from the 1810s onwards British traders started trying to introduce Indian cotton into China. At the beginning the attempts were unsuccessful, because – as stated in a letter by James Matheson and Robert Taylor of the East India Company¹⁸ – Chinese people considered foreign cotton as inferior to 'their Grass Cloth'. Only later, after learning what sort of texture and patterns were despised and appreciated in China, the English cotton manufacturers – especially from Manchester – were able to impose their products on the Chinese market.

The whole process of the cotton trade in the first half of the 19th century, thus, provides an interesting example of the attempt by westerners to conform their goods to Chinese requirements, in the same way as Chinese craftsmen and merchants had been adapting their wares to suit foreigners' tastes.

Rice

Acquired by the British Museum in 1860, Ch. Ptg. 396 (fig. 4.23) is an album of 12 leaves describing the cultivation of rice. The set, probably executed between the third and fourth decades of the 19th century, does not emerge among the finest works in the collection.

It is painted in bright colours with a certain degree of shading. The range of colours used is quite limited: mainly blue, green, brown and grey. The sky is in a tone of

¹⁶ For information about this series, see Patrick Conner, *The China Trade. 1600-1860*, Brighton, The Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums, 1986, p. 63.

¹⁷ Cf. Robert Fortune, op. cit., volume I, pp. 199-209.

¹⁸ See Patrick Conner, *The China Trade. 1600-1860*, Brighton, The Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums, 1986, p. 144.

purple in the upper part, degrading into a pale pink on the horizon. Some effects created by the colouring, like shadows projected on the ground and images mirrored in the water, hint at an influence of western techniques. The vague background is briefly suggested by a few trees and mountains. Also figures seem to have been sketched without paying much attention to proportions and details. Hence, the overall impression is of watercolours quickly executed under the pressure of the market's demand.

As explained by the descriptive inscriptions in Cantonese in the lower right corner, the 12 leaves, measuring 38 x 50 cm, represent all the stages of cultivating, reaping and refining rice. Only the last one does not bear any written explanation, but it is easy to understand that the scene refers to the final packing of rice. Some men are kneeling in front of a small altar, praying and offering food and incense to a god, in order to thank him for the good harvest, and ask for his protection on the crops. This particular scene of religious devotion in a rural context, which is not usually found in sets about other production activities, was not uncommon among the leaves depicting the various stages of growing, harvesting and grinding rice. The final scene with a family celebrating at a shrine is reported to close a similar set of 12 leaves painted around 1810.¹⁹ In the original popular religion, the worship of deities related to agricultural activities had always been an essential practice. Usually peasants made offerings to Shen Nong, the God of Farmland, in order to obtain his protection for a bumper harvest, but there were also distinct gods for each aspect of rural life. The fact that rice has always been the traditional staple food in China probably explains the strong need of the population to ask for divine assistance and benevolence, in order to ensure an abundant production every year. In particular, after harvesting grain and rice, and storing the crops in barns, peasants would pray the Barn God (Cang Shen 倉神) for protection. The evidence of the link between this god and rice production is given by a popular print where the Barn God is represented in official robes, with two attendants at his side (fig. 4.24). In the background it is possible to read the inscription 'Palace of the Barn God' (Cang Shen gong 倉神宮) and the couplet scrolls requesting 'Inexhaustible Harvests Every Year' (Niannian qu bu jin 年年取不盡) and 'Surplus Rice Each Month' (Yueyue yongyou mi 月月用有米).

¹⁹ For information about this series, see *Fine Chinese Export Porcelain and Paintings*, Christie's, London, Thursday 5 and Friday 6 July 1984, p. 41.

A very admirable example of the depiction of rice growing is on the Robert Morris paper (fig. 4.25) - now known as the Beauport/Merriman papers – executed in ca. 1784, and defined as “the most magnificent and important set of Chinese wallpaper purchased in China for the American market”.²¹ It is supposed that the 12 panels making the complete series of rice production were originally accompanied by other three sets, each of 12 panels, representing the production of porcelain, tea and silk. The comparison between the watercolours of Ch. Ptg. 396 and the panels highlights that the criteria followed to paint the two works served different purposes. As for the former, the artists’ main concerns were to satisfy the foreigners’ desire to acquire some knowledge about Chinese customs and way of life, as well as to make their products available for the market as soon as possible. As for the latter, the artists aimed at creating a real work of art that should be appealing to the westerners’ taste for “oriental curiosities”, and would form a harmonious and elegant decorative effect. In this case, thus, the cultivation of rice becomes only a pretext, as any other typical Chinese theme, to build up an “exotic” composition. As Crossman well describes, “the activity of the Beauport/Merriman papers takes place on several levels, ignoring traditional western perspective, and soars up to a mountain range and sky at the very top. The bottom and middle ground consists of buildings, figures working at their trades, gardens and rivers, all wonderfully conceived as an overall pattern”.²²

The number of sets about rice production is relatively inferior, if compared to that of sets about other products. As a matter of fact, western merchants were not particularly interested in rice as an export good. However, it was a very important element of Chinese society and tradition, and, thus, also deserved to be known and appreciated by foreigners.

²¹ Information about this wallpaper can be found in C. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors’ Club Ltd., 1991, pp. 397-402.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 402.

Sugar

A rare specimen, if not unique of its kind, is Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 31 (fig. 4.26), which depicts the cultivation of sugar. It was donated to the museum by Miss Reeves in 1877, together with the leaves classified as Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 3 and Folder 15, but it was apparently produced by another workshop, as suggested by the different type and size of the paper, and the different style of the drawings. The 12 leaves, which can be dated to the early 19th century, are of a relatively small size, just measuring 35 x 37.5 cm. The pictures are only outlined in ink, with thin, delicate lines. The composition is not completely similar to any of the sets examined so far. The buildings present the usual geometric, regular structure, and the landscape is simply rendered by a few stylised plants and rocks, as in many other sets of the same period. On the other hand, the figures are particularly tiny, with round faces and small eyes, and some trees have sinuous trunks with big exposed roots, large foliage and marked, thick ramification.

All the stages of preparing the soil, planting, harvesting, crushing the canes, boiling and drying the sugar, packing, and loading the finished product upon a boat, are described by plain images and explained by Cantonese inscriptions – of four characters each – vertically written on the right side of the drawing.

Although a detailed written record of the production and uses of sugar in China is given by Sir John Barrow, private secretary to Lord Macartney and one of his suite in the British embassy to China between 1792 and 1794,²³ no other painted example of the production of sugar has been found, either in the British Museum, or in other collections, thus, making it difficult to understand why such an album was executed or commissioned. However, a tentative answer can be put forward, if some other peculiar specimens preserved at the British Library are considered. They are a series of four albums – of ten leaves each – all bound in the same original green silk brocade. The drawings – uniform in style – were painted in the same workshop around 1820. As Mildred Archer argues, the inscription *Library India Office* on and inside the cover “shows that they cannot have been registered by the library until

²³ Cf. Sir John Barrow, *Travels in China*, London, T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806, pp. 539-540.

after 1858", when this denomination started being used, "but the drawings may well have been executed and deposited earlier".²³

What makes these albums as exceptional as Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 31 is their theme. As a matter of fact, they respectively depict the manufacture of cast iron, white lead, red lead, and vermilion in China. The quality of the drawings is not particularly high, the range of colours is mainly limited to grey, blue and brown, and the background is virtually plain, without any element denoting an indoor or outdoor environment. On the other hand, the processes are represented step by step in a very clear way. On each leaf, measuring 40.5 x 49 cm, there are also explanations in Chinese characters carefully inscribed in the lower right corner. The singularity of the inscriptions lies in the fact that they have to be read from right to left, according to the traditional Chinese habit, whereas usually, on other export paintings the characters can be read from left to right, adopting the western use.

All the above examples seem to prove that, following their general curiosity about "things Chinese", foreign visitors were keen on recording all sorts of techniques and practices they had the opportunity to witness, in order to take back to their countries a painted documentation – either by themselves, or commissioned from local artists – and written notes of their experiences. For instance, the album about the manufacture of cast iron, depicting the whole process of making new round-bottomed cooking pans from scraps of old ones, finds an equivalent written description in Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest's account of the Dutch Embassy to the Chinese emperor, between 1794 and 1795. In his journal he reports the encounter with a tinker and explains how he "mended and soldered frying-pans of cast iron that were cracked and full of holes, and restored them to their primitive state".²⁴

The existence of peculiar albums, such as Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 31, confirms what has emerged in the course of the discussion about this part of the British Museum's

²³ Cf. Mildred Archer, *Company Drawings in the India Office Library*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1972, p. 263.

²⁴ The translation 'frying pans of cast iron' is the exact equivalent of 'poêles à frir de fer fondu', which appears in the original French version of the account. The episode is reported to have taken place on February 17th 1795, when the embassy was returning from Beijing to Canton. See Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest, *Voyage de l'Ambassade de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales Hollandaises, vers l'Empereur de la Chine, dans les années 1794 & 1795...*, Philadelphie, 1797, vol. I, pp. 275-276. For the English version see *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company, to the Court of the Emperor of China, In the Years 1794 and 1795...*; *Taken from the Journal of André Everard van Braam, Chief of the Direction of that Company, and Second in the Embassy*, translated from the original by M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Mery, printed for R. Phillips, London, 1798, vol. II, pp. 78-79.

collection of Chinese export paintings. The foreigners' demand for the representation of scenes showing typical Chinese tools and techniques well suited the already established tradition of illustrations, especially woodcuts, about all the range of relevant handicraft and productive activities, from bronze casting, to paper manufacture, and even ink making. No matter for which specific purpose or in what context, by depicting these subjects, Cantonese artists – and Chinese artists, in general – not only contributed to keep ancient practices and skills alive and always present in the minds of people of all times, but also helped to provide the public far away in the West with a more accurate and broader picture of Chinese culture.

Illustrations

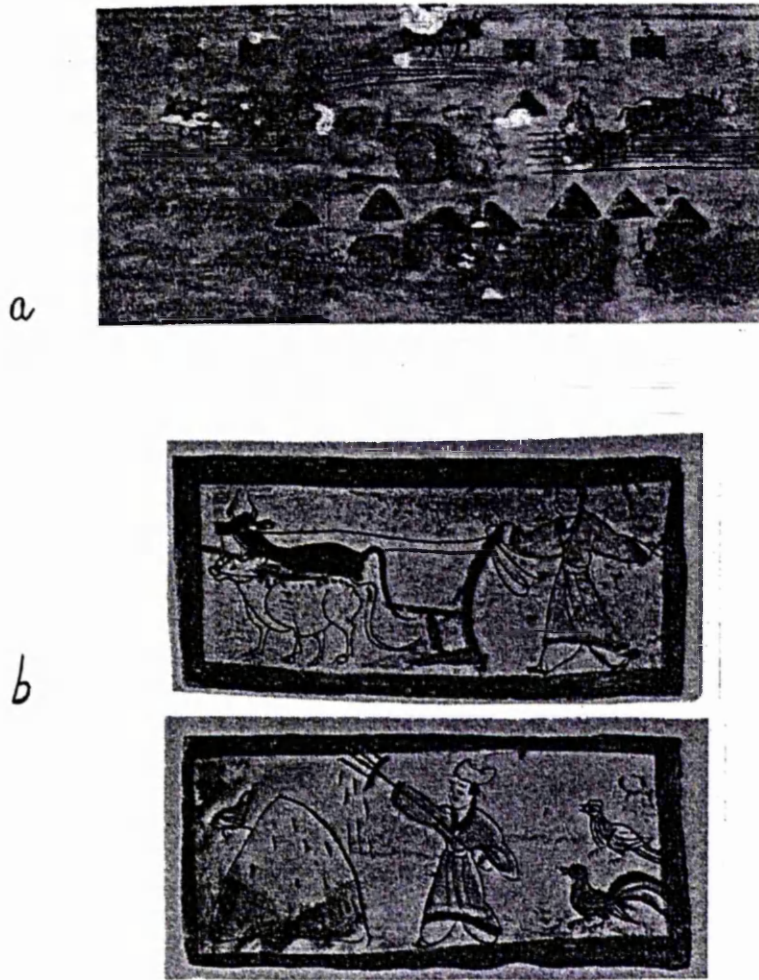


Figure 4.1 a) Farming scene. Wall painting inside a tomb at Holingol, Inner Mongolia. Eastern Han. 131 x 262 cm. Reported in *Wenwu*, 1974, 1. b) Above: ploughing. Below: winnowing. Painted bricks inside a tomb at Jiayuguan, Gansu province. Wei-Jin period (220-419). Both 17 x 36 cm. Reported in *Wenwu*, 1974, 9.



Figure 4. 2 Copy after Zhang Xuan (8th century), *Ladies Preparing Newly-woven Silk* (detail of a handscroll). Ink, colour and gold on silk. Early 12th century. 37 x 145.3 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 4. 3 Left: picking mulberry leaves. Right: raising silkworms. Woodcuts illustrating silk production, from *Gengzhitu*, 1697 edition. East Asian Library, University of Toronto.



Figure 4. 4 Unknown Chinese artist, *Ploughing and Harvesting*. Light colours on silk. Southern Song (1128-1279). 24.8 x 25.7 cm. Palace Museum, Beijing.

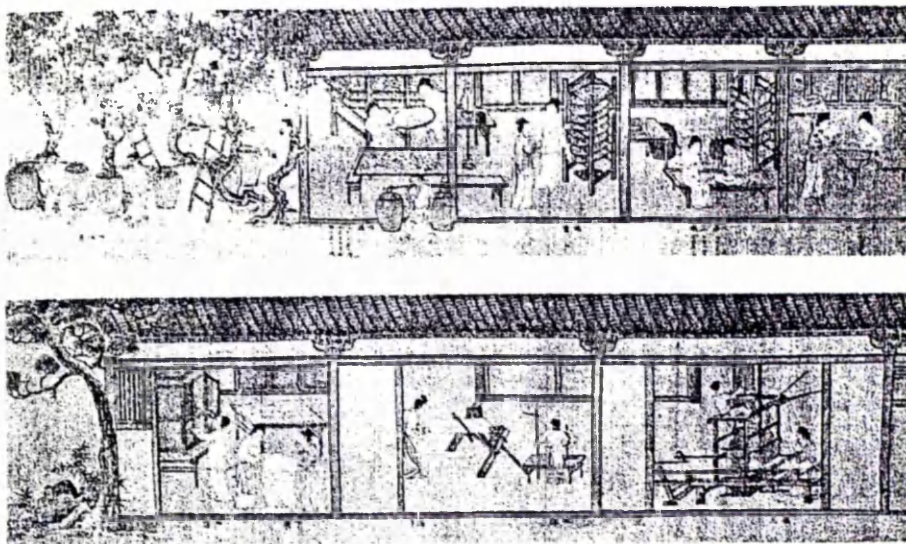


Figure 4. 5 Unknown Chinese artist, *Raising Silkworms and Weaving* (detail of a scroll). Light colours on silk. Southern Song. 27.5 x 513cm. Heilongjiang Museum, Harbin.



Figure 4. 6 Roasting tea leaves. Watercolours on paper. 34.7 x 37 cm. One of a set of 24. Add 392a. British Museum, London.



Figure 4. 7 a-b) Planting tea. c) Stamping down tea leaves. d) Bales of tea being collected by sampan. Watercolours on paper. 39.2 x 50.5 cm. Four of a set of 24. Add. 221. British Museum, London.

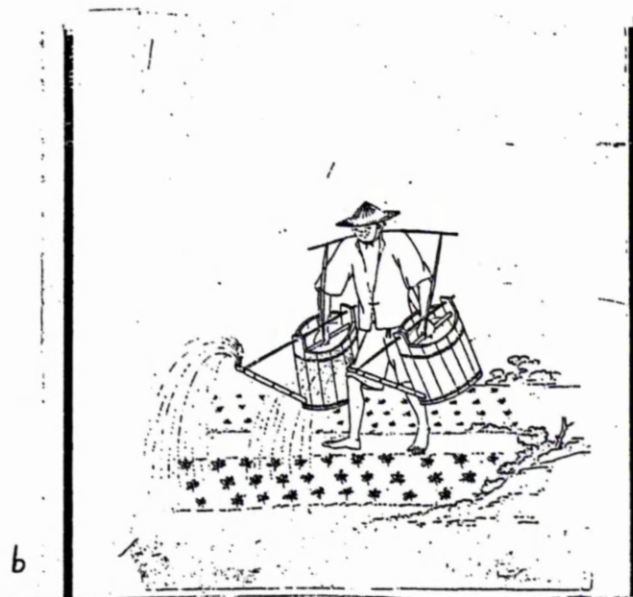
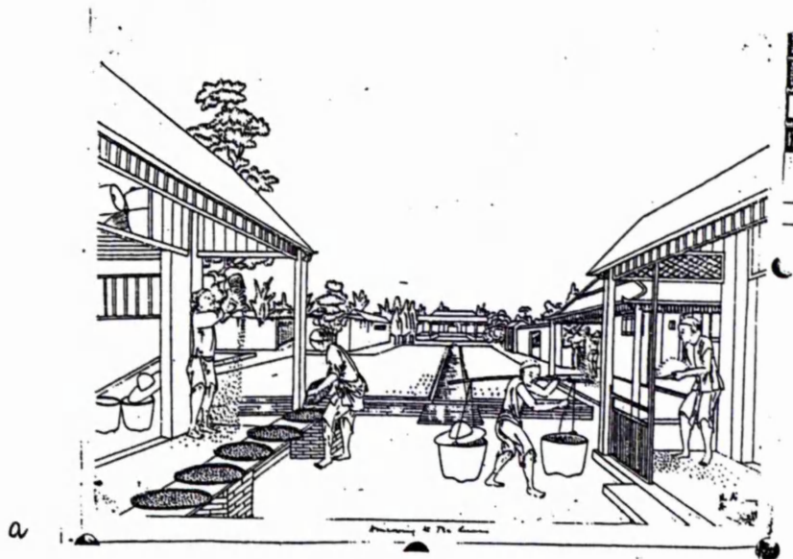


Figure 4. 8 a) Winnowing the tea leaves. Ink on paper. 38.5x50 cm. One of a set of 13. b) Watering the seedlings. Ink on paper. 37.2 x 29 cm. Unmounted leaf. Both Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 15. British Museum, London.



Figure 4. 9 One of a set of woodblock leaves designed by Chen Hongshou (1598-1652) for playing cards illustrated with the characters from the novel *Water Margin*.



a



b

Figure 4. 10 a) Examining samples. b) Picking tea leaves. Watercolours on paper. 39.2 x 45 cm. Two of a set of six. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 3. British Museum, London.

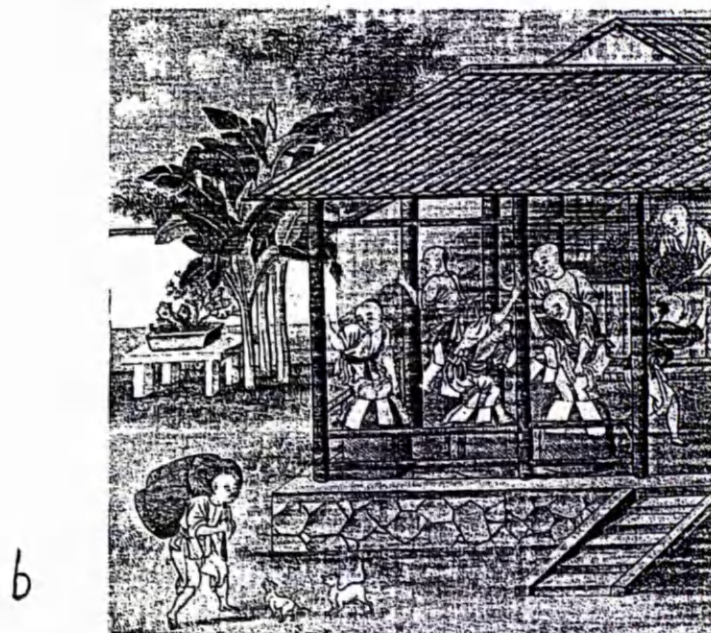
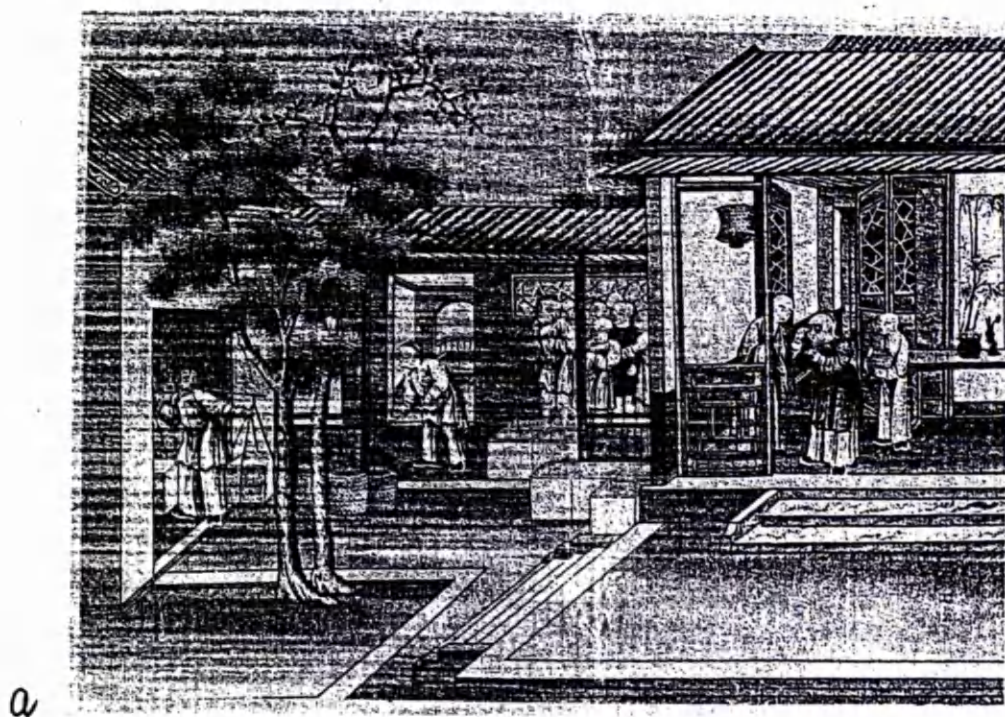


Figure 4.11 a) Stamping down tea leaves and packing for sale. Gouache on paper. ca. 1810. 37 x 30.5 cm. *Christie's*, 5-6 July 1984. b) Stamping down tea leaves. Watercolours on paper. Late 18th century. 28.9 x 27 cm. *Christie's*, 6 April 1998.



Figure 4. 12 a) Sun Qua (active 1830-1870). Above: planting tea. Below: harvesting tea. Watercolours on paper. 17.5 x 26.7 cm. John G. Johnson Collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. **b)** You Qua (active mid-19th century). Planting tea. Watercolours on paper. 19.5 x 29.5 cm. Sotheby's, 16 June 1999.

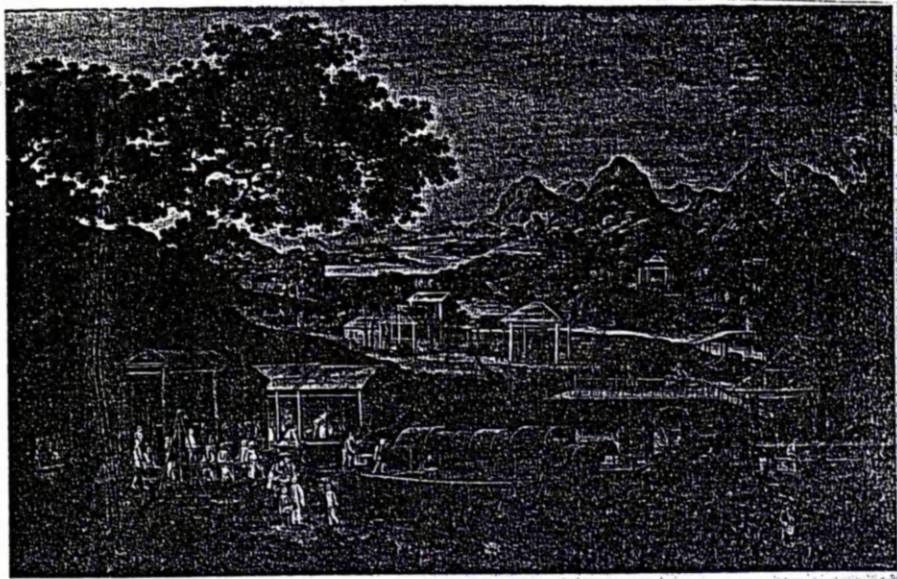


Figure 4. 13 Various stages of tea production, oil on canvas, ca. 1800. 82 x 127 cm. The Royal Pavilion, Brighton.



Figure 4. 14 Auguste Borget (1808-1877), *Market Scene, Tea Picking*. Wood engravings. From P. E. Forgues, *La Chine Ouverte*, Paris, H. Fournier, 1845.

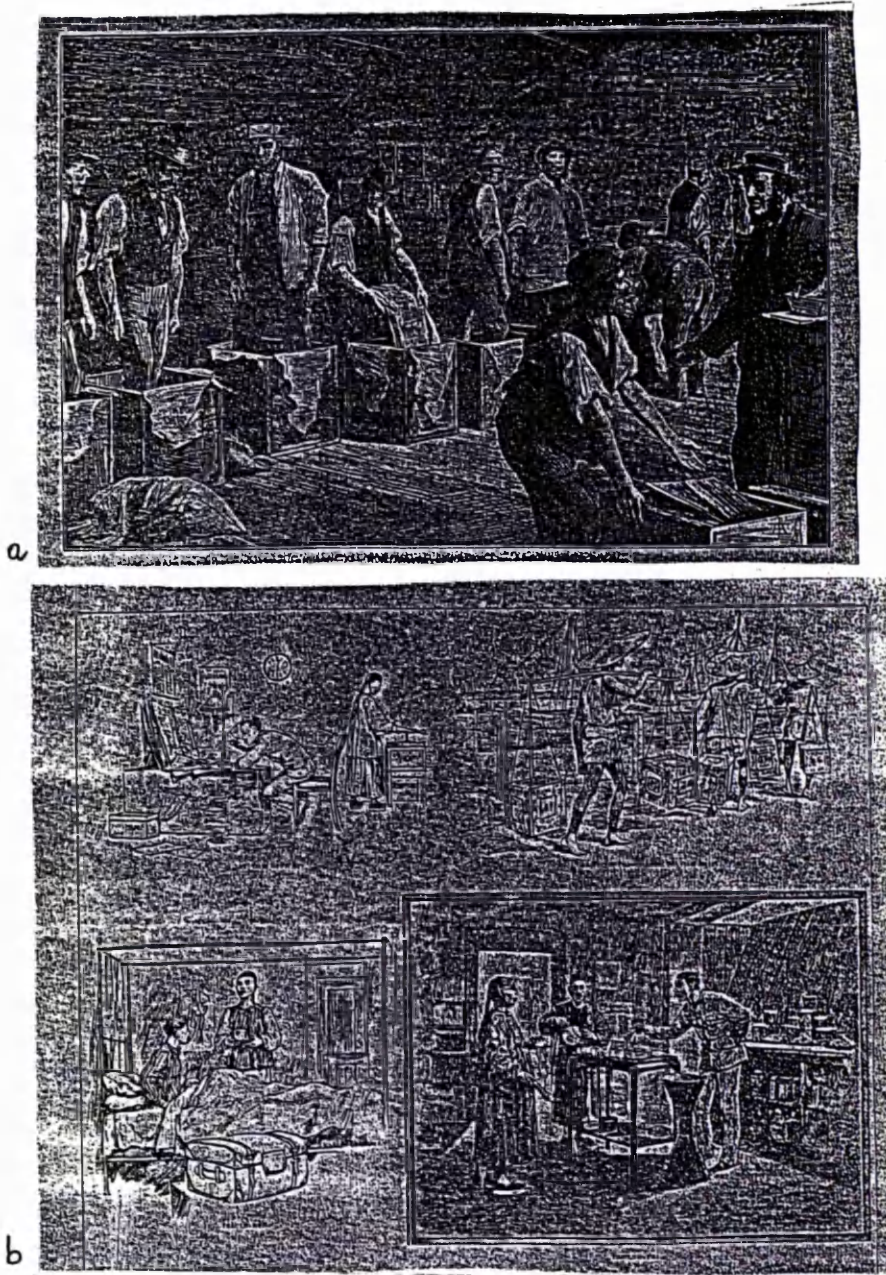


Figure 4. 15 a) Stamping down the tea. One of two sketches at a tea warehouse, line engravings. Published in *Illustrated London News* (supplement), 12 December 1874. b) A tea-taster's life and work in China. Four of eight printed vignettes. Published in *Illustrated London News*, 13 October 1888.

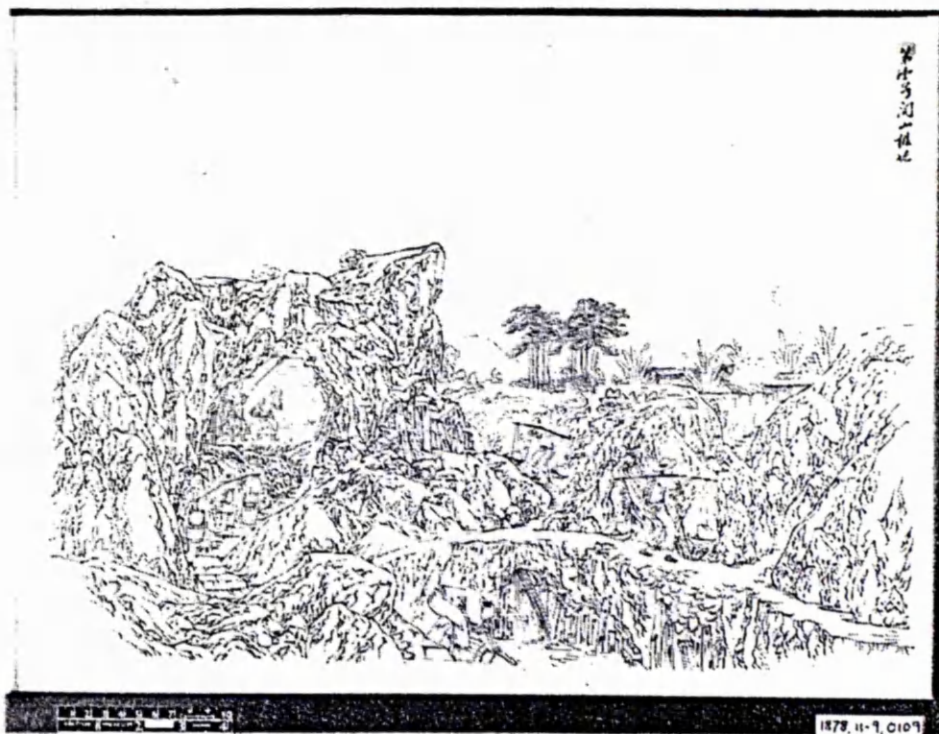


Figure 4. 16 Digging the clay from a hill. Ink on paper. 37.5 x 51 cm. One of a set of 24. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 18. British Museum, London.

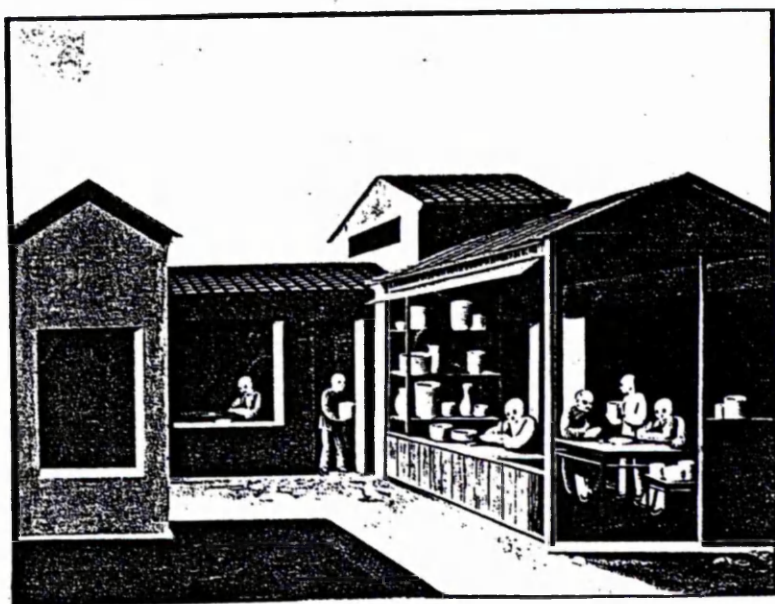


Figure 4. 17 Painting porcelain. Watercolours on paper. 41 x 53 cm. One of a set of 24. Add. 220. British Museum, London.



Figure 4. 18 a) Pounding the clay by water power. 38 x 48 cm. One of a set of 12. b) Firing the ware. 39 x 52.5 cm. One of two. Watercolours on paper. Mounted on panels in the Stein Room, British Museum, London.

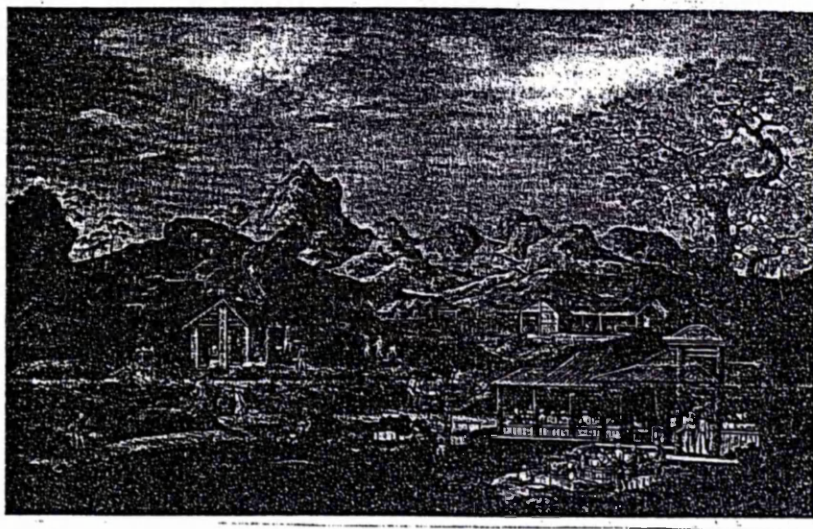


Figure 4. 19 Various stages of porcelain production, oil on canvas, ca. 1810. 82 x 127 cm. Royal Pavilion, Brighton.



Figure 4. 21 Picking mulberry leaves. Painted bricks inside a tomb at Jiayuguan, Gansu. Wei-Jin period. 17 x 36 cm. Reported in *Wenwu*, 1974, 9.

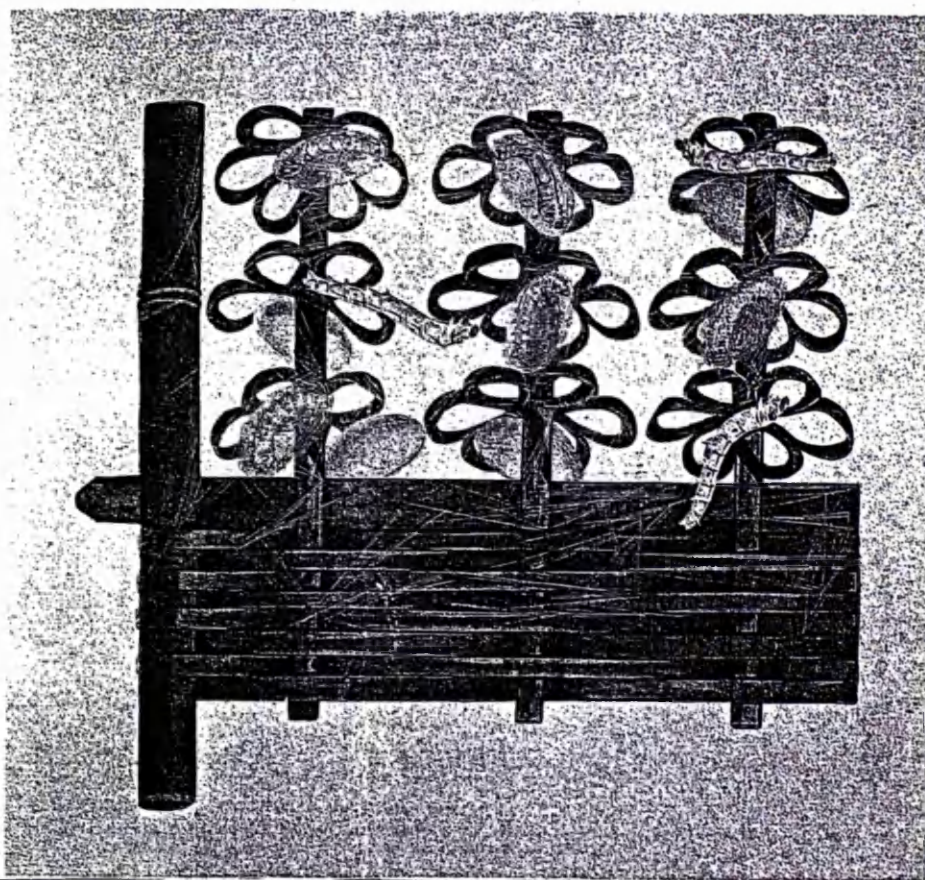


Figure 4. 22 Silkworms spinning cocoons, watercolours on paper, ca. 1806. NHD 43, British Library, London.

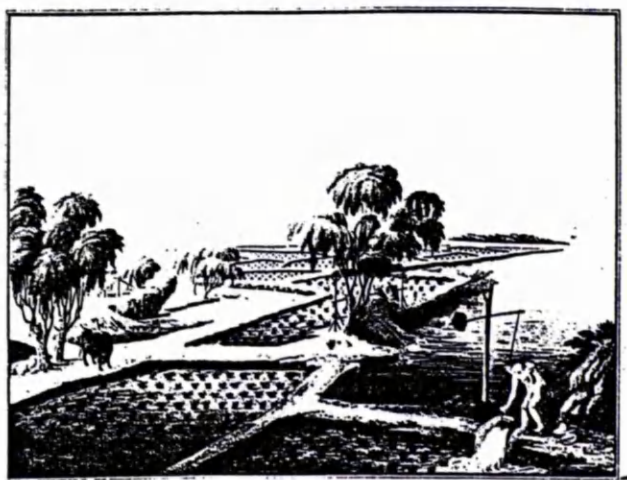


Figure 4. 23 Water wheel in a paddy field. Watercolours on paper. 38 x 50 cm. One of a set of 12. Ch. Ptg. 396. British Museum, London.



Figure 4. 24 Palace of the Barn God. Colour print. 23.5 x 16.5 cm. Pucheng, Shaanxi.

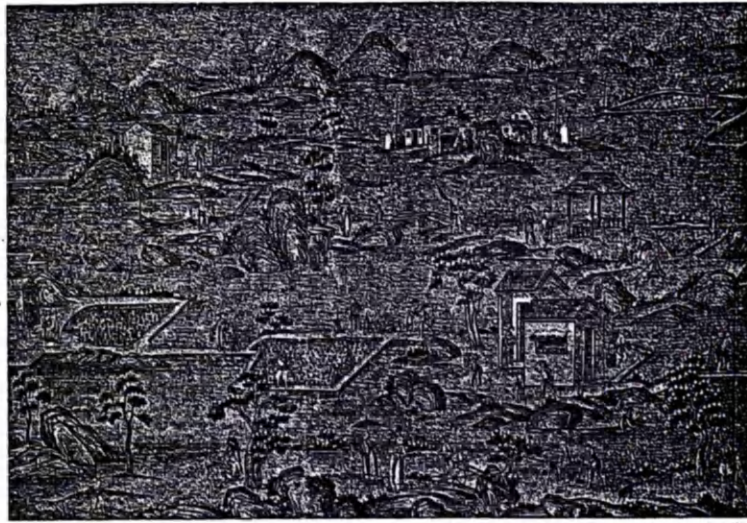


Figure 4. 25 Growing rice, wallpaper, ca. 1784. Detail of one of nine panels, each 375.9 x 119.4 cm. Each panel is made up of six pieces of paper measuring 58.4 x 119.4 cm. Collection of Beauport, Gloucester, Massachusetts.

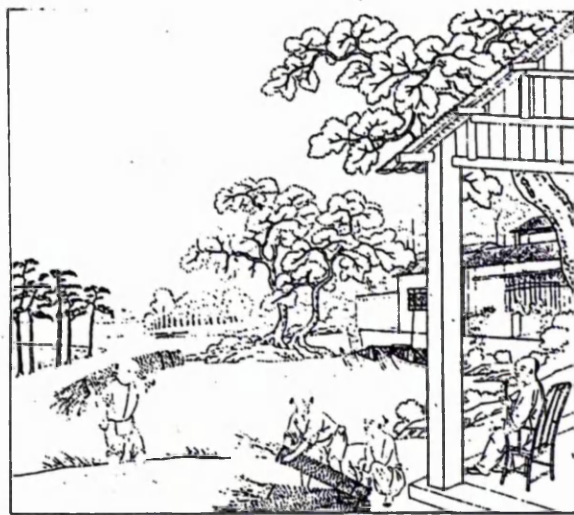


Figure 4. 26 Harvesting sugar canes. Ink on paper. 40.5 x 49 cm. One of a set of 12. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 31. British Museum, London.

CHAPTER 5

TRADES AND CRAFTS

In the Confucian social system merchants and commercial activities were traditionally considered as inferior to other workers and activities, because they were thought not to produce goods, but only to trade goods produced by others. However, shops and open markets have always been close-woven into the fabric of Chinese life, as demonstrated, for example, by the numerous Han tomb tiles on which all sorts of retailers are represented preparing and arranging their products for display, or dealing with their customers. Particularly interesting is a market scene of the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220): in every corner of the composition some kind of exchange is taking place, and the artist has successfully captured something of the animation and the excitement of business (fig. 5.1). The peculiar atmosphere and environment of such a scene – which can still be easily found in Chinese markets and old-fashioned shopping areas today – had remained absolutely genuine when the presence of western trades started to increase considerably in the 18th century.

With thousands of shops counted in the proximity of the foreign factories alone, Canton was one of the greatest commercial centres of the world in the 19th century. In their vivid accounts, western visitors described shopping at Canton as an irresistible temptation and an exciting experience. They took note not only of the streets, the shops and the products, but also of the “mercantile hardship”¹ involved in the negotiations with local shopkeepers. C. Toogood Downing, a surgeon at the service of the Honourable East India Company, who spent some months at Canton between 1836 and 1837, wrote profusely about the numerous Chinese tradesmen going every morning to the foreigners’ inn to show their merchandise, and about the difficulties in communicating with them even with the mediation of a linguist.²

Impressed by the variety and quantity of goods, the skilfulness of the artisans, the enterprise of the shopkeepers and the vivacity of the local market, the foreign traders often wanted to include in their Chinese souvenirs albums depicting typical trades and occupations.

¹ See C. Toogood Downing, *The Fan-Quei in China. In 1836-7*, London, Henry Colburn Publisher, 1838, vol. 1, p. 272.

² Ibid., pp. 272-290.

Sets of this kind became more and more popular during the first half of the 19th century, as the international trade with China intensified. The range of illustrations was so wide, that sometimes an album could contain even more than one hundred leaves. The crowd of figures, usually each singly depicted on one sheet, can be divided in three groups, according to the occupation shown: craftsmen, travelling salesmen and shopkeepers.

The same distinction can be applied to the 12 sets from the British Museum's collection, which deal with this specific theme.

Craftsmen

Five of the 12 sets under examination mainly present artisans with their tools, usually sitting on a chair at a table or simply on a low stool, and concentrating on their jobs. The figure is placed just in the middle of a blank sheet, and great attention is paid to the precise and detailed rendering of all the implements and the techniques used. Among these illustrations there are also some of street vendors with their baskets of merchandise, standing or sitting on the ground, patiently waiting for customers, or animatedly negotiating with a buyer.

The album Ch. Ptg. 401, acquired by the British Museum in 1877, is a gallery of 120 figures engaged in the most typical and most frequently illustrated activities. Each leaf measures 38.7 x 29 cm and bears some Chinese characters – usually three – neatly written in the lower right corner, describing the occupation shown above. All the captions are listed on a separate sheet, accompanied by their English translation. The drawings are executed in thin, regular lines of black ink. The figures are all very similar to each other, with big, round heads and big eyes. This uniformity stresses the fact that what is important is not the identity of a specific artisan, but rather what he is doing and how he is working. Turning over the album leaves, the viewer has the impression of walking in a Chinese street and passing by workshops and stalls of all sorts. Here, a tailor is calmly and carefully sewing, sitting at his table, and wearing thick glasses; there, a cook is vigorously stirring *dou jiang* 豆瓣酱, a thick soy-bean sauce, in a large saucepan; over there, an archery maker is smoothing a bamboo stick to make it into an arrow, while some finished bows of different shapes and sizes are

hanging on a wooden frame, and finished arrows are kept in a wicker basket (fig. 5.2). Furthermore, among the street vendors, besides those offering common merchandise, like fruit, vegetables and flowers, there are also some selling products that in the eye of the western visitors seemed more peculiar, such as live ducks, magpies, door ornaments and cards with auspicious sentences for the New Year.

All these images are represented again and again in other albums about trades and crafts. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that not only the same occupations are depicted, but, apart from a few variations in certain cases, they are also rendered in a very similar way, depicting figures with the same features, in the same posture, working with the same tools, and performing exactly the same specific activity. This characteristic can be explained by the practice – especially widespread in the first half of the 19th century – of circulating the same models to copy among different workshops, in order to make the process of painting particularly sought-after subjects easier and faster. As a result, the foreign customers were provided with a series of Chinese stereotypes that contributed to build the image of China in Europe. Of the “two volumes containing each 50 coloured drawings, which represent different Chinese arts and trades”, included in his collection, van Braam writes that they not only provide “a knowledge of several tools; as well as several articles of furniture,” but “they also give us an exact idea of the habits of the people; indicate their usages; and sometimes exhibit traits of the Chinese character”.³

The popularity and great impact of this theme in Europe is proved by the successful publication of *The Costume of China*, an illustrated book that first appeared in a bilingual English and French edition in 1800. Its compiler, the English soldier George Henry Mason, spent some months in Canton around 1790, as he was recovering from an illness caught during his service in India. An enthusiastic admirer of China, he explains in the introduction that sixty stipple-engraved plates, copied from a set of watercolours he had purchased at Canton, were presented and discussed in the book in order to offer “accurate representations of the domestic and mechanical habits of an original and remote nation”, to the public in Europe.⁴ There have been speculations about the originals for the illustrations over a long period of

³ See Andreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest, translated into English by M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Mery, *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company, to the Court of the Emperor of China, in the Years 1794 and 1795*, London, R. Phillips, 1798, vol. 2, p. 310. Cf. also the original French version *Voyage de l'Ambassade de la Compagnie des Indes Orientales Hollandaises, vers l'Empereur de la Chine, dans les Années 1794 & 1795*, Philadelphie, 1797, Tome 1, p. XXX.

⁴ See the “Preface” by George Henry Mason in his *The Costume of China*, London, W. Miller, 1800.

time, and the debate is still open. Craig Clunas suggests that a hundred-sheet set held by the Victoria and Albert Museum, and executed between 1780 and 1790, could have been the original source for the reproductions of Mason's book.⁵ However, Crossman expresses his doubts about these claims, since, on the basis of the scanty available data, no specific connection can be established between that set and the engravings. Furthermore, he points out that "the mere coincidence of the individual subjects matching the engraved plates" cannot be used as a sufficient evidence of a direct relationship between the two series, because "it certainly has been seen in several instances that the Chinese artisans and painters repeatedly copied the subject matter they produced, over a long period of time, and not just from their own studios, but from fellow artists and workshops".⁶

What is particularly important of the illustrations in Mason's book is the fact that in the lower left corner of each plate there is the inscription: "Pu Qua, Canton, Delin. Published May 4, 1799, by W Miller, Old Bond Street, London". The name Pu Qua has also been found on a receipt for a painting on glass, addressed to John Green, who was on the *Empress of China*, the first American ship to sail to Canton, in 1784.⁷ This discovery allows to establish that the original watercolours purchased by Mason were a product of the earliest named Chinese export artist – or, perhaps, of his studio – to have been identified so far.

It could also be possible that many of the models copied in later albums came just from Pu Qua's workshop, attracting and inspiring other artists, as they were finely drawn and coloured. As a matter of fact, representations almost identical to those in *The Costume of China* are frequently included in various sets. An example is the illustration of a puppet-showman (fig. 5.3) – plate XXXVIII in Mason's book – which finds an equivalent in an album of the early 19th century held by the British Library. The entertainment depicted, common on Chinese streets, appeared so unusual in the eyes of westerners that Mason thought an explanation was necessary: "A person mounted on a stool, and concealed as far as the ankles with a covering of

⁵ Clunas discusses this hypothesis, analysing the Victoria and Albert Museum's set and comparing it with the engravings in Mason's book, in his *Chinese Export Watercolours*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Far Eastern Series, 1984, pp. 33-42.

⁶ C. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1991, p. 185.

⁷ This finding is reported by Philip Chadwick Foster Smith in his *The Empress of China*, Philadelphia Maritime Museum, 1984, p. 262.

blue calico, causes some very small puppets to perform a kind of play, the box at the top representing a stage".⁸

It is worth noticing that sometimes even foreigners copied Pu Qua's models, probably from one or the other of the numerous reproductions. It is the case of a pencil drawing of the beginning of the 19th century entitled *Raccomodeur de Porcelaine* and signed "Mary Conner" (fig. 5.4, a), which perfectly matches the description given by Mason for the mender of porcelain (fig. 5.4, b) in plate XXVIII: "this old man is working with a small drill pointed by a diamond; through the holes he introduces a very fine wire, and thus renders the basin again fit for service".⁹ A similar image is also contained in the album Add. 323 at the British Museum, purchased from a certain Mr F. Bailliere in 1844. The set had probably been in the possession of an Italian for some time, as many of the leaves bear Italian captions written in pencil. Because of the various sizes of the 43 sheets, the heterogeneous styles of drawing and colouring, and the presence of Chinese inscriptions only under some of the illustrations, it is likely that the watercolours were produced in different workshops. Among the most peculiar occupations represented in the set, there are diviners, astrologers, sellers of 'exotic edible meat', such as that of dogs, cats and mice, and a frog-catcher (fig. 5.5).¹⁰

The album Add. 207, donated to the British Museum by Mr A. W. Franks¹¹ in 1896, contains one hundred leaves of fine watercolours, which, for the accuracy of the details, the rendering of figures with delicate traits and round, full bodies, and the mastering of colours, strongly recall Pu Qua's paintings and make it possible to presume that they were executed - if not during the last years of the 18th century - at the latest, in the first decade of the 19th century. Each sheet measures 37.5 x 29.9 cm, and the illustrations mainly refer to typical Chinese arts and crafts, such as making fans, decorating lacquerware, mending and producing rattan furniture (fig. 5.6, a). Among these characteristic activities, the image of a painter sitting at his table and patiently working at a landscape in oil on canvas (fig. 5.6, b) seems to be out of place, for it shows a Chinese artist painting in a western manner. On the other hand,

⁸ See the comment to plate XXXVIII, in George Henry Mason, op. cit.

⁹ Ibid., plate XXVIII.

¹⁰ The Chinese practice of eating frogs, dogs and rats is confirmed by Mason in his comment to the illustration of a frog-catcher. Cf. George Henry Mason, op. cit., plate VII.

¹¹ Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826-1897) was keeper at the British Museum from 1866 to 1896 and greatly contributed to the classification and enrichment of the museum's collections.

this 'intrusion' reflects the Chinese effort to adapt their market to foreigners' demands.

However, the western influence at that time was still rather superficial, and could not penetrate the order and the rules of Chinese society. Thus, Add. 207 - as well as all the sets about crafts - clearly describes the traditional division of work between men and women. As a matter of fact, women, mostly occupied with the administration of the household, are rarely represented in these series, and when they appear, they are related to a limited range of activities, such as spinning cotton, reeling silk, embroidering and weaving (fig. 5.6, c).

Another album donated by Mr Franks is Add. 211. Although it treats the same subject as Add. 207, it presents completely different features. The 50 drawings of various sizes are sketched in ink with approximate traits, outlining only essential elements. Some of them are apparently unfinished, thus, indicating that they are just drafts for watercolours. An interesting aspect of this set is that on some leaves there are English inscriptions in ink and pencil. These notes, presumably written by the foreign client who commissioned the watercolours, are instructions for the colouring and the definition of details, as can be observed, for instance, on a leaf with the image of a peep-show (fig. 5.7). Next to the box with the perspective glass, through which a succession of pictures is seen, it can be distinctly read: "Scarlet ground, black ornaments". At the bottom of the sheet is specified: "The ornaments on the show box are to be gilt on a black ground". While, next to the man who operates the machine the note explains: "The hair twisted round the head".

Studies of figures engaged in various crafts and trades were in fashion throughout the 19th century. Add. 179 is a collection of small albums about different subjects, among which there is one of 30 illustrations of professions. As specified on the cover, the whole group was in the possession of Colonel S. Wingale in 1908, but another of a number of copies of the some watercolours representing professions,¹² is held by the British Library, and dated mid-late 19th century in the *Classed Inventory of Oriental Manuscripts* of the library. It can be inferred that the different copies were produced by the same hand and approximately in the same period, because they all bear the red seal of the author, Zhou Peichun 周培春, in the lower left corner of each leaf. The peculiarity of this set lies not only in the fact that it is signed, but also

¹² One more copy of these illustrations is presented in *Christie's catalogue Fine Jadeite Jewellery, Jade Carvings and China Trade Pictures*, 1993, p. 165.

in the fact that – as stated in one of the copies – the artist was from Beijing, thus, demonstrating the diffusion of this kind of representations. The leaves of the album of professions preserved at the British Museum measure 26.7 x 33 cm, and are inscribed with long, well-written Chinese captions.

The inscription on the first sheet explains that the depicted figure represents a Chinese barber (fig. 5.8), who, carrying his tools, walks around the city and stops on the side of the streets to serve his customers, shaving beards, cutting hair, or adjusting men's characteristic pigtails.

The scenes of barbers working on the streets always left foreign visitors astonished and amused, so that such a practice was one of the most frequently described in travel accounts and reproduced in sketches. A vivid description, which matches Zhou Peichun's watercolour, is the one given by the American traveller Osmond Tiffany, Jr., who was in Canton in 1844, studying – as he specifies – “aspect, manners, customs, habits and ranks of Chinese life”.¹³ He writes that the client “sits down on the top of the barber's chest of drawers with a very resigned and subdued air”. He continues saying that when the barber walks about, “the drawers containing shaving apparatus, are suspended from one end of a pole, and from the other hangs a wooden cylinder, with a metal bottom, containing hot water, and heated by a chafing-dish beneath”. Then, referring to a scene of hair-cutting, he explains that while the barber is at work, “the patient” holds up “a plate to catch the shreds that fall; and it is singular fact that this hair is always preserved, and in a state of decomposition serves, with other substances, to manure the land”.¹⁴

Images of Chinese barbers can be easily found among the drawings of Auguste Borget, such as the one that also shows the interior of a barber's shop (fig. 5.9, a), and among the works of the English painter George Chinnery (1774-1852), like the very expressive portrait of a street barber (fig. 5.9, b) sitting on his portable stool and posing for the artist. Chinnery, generally considered by the critics as the best of the China coast artists, had spent a long time in India – from 1802 to 1830 – before setting off to Macao, to escape heavy debts. He remained in China for the rest of his life, paying a few visits to Canton, and finally settling in Hong Kong after the Opium War (1839-1842), when the city was surrendered to Great Britain. The artistic

¹³ See Osmond Tiffany, Jr., *The Canton Chinese or the American's Sojourn into the Celestial Empire*, Boston and Cambridge, James Munroe and Company, 1849, p. VII.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

production of this immensely prolific painter includes portraits and landscapes in oil, watercolours and drawings in ink over pencil. However, above all he preferred to sketch scenes of everyday life, with groups of Chinese figures eating and drinking at food stalls, playing games, and especially craftsmen and street vendors.

Pedlars

Travelling salesmen are the main subjects of three sets in the British Museum's collection.

Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 12, donated by Miss Reeves in 1877, is a series of 12 watercolours on sheets of different sizes and different quality. The treatment of particularly bright colours, the details of the figures, not very tall and with large faces, and the background characterised by a brick wall with an opening – usually a door or window – are features common to all of the images and allow to establish that the watercolours were executed by the same artist, or, at least, the same workshop. One of the illustrations is on English paper watermarked “J. Whatman 1825”, suggesting that the set was produced in the late 1820s. The mills of the Whatman family were one of the most prosperous papermaking businesses in England in the 18th century, and Whatman paper was the most frequently encountered among the sheets of western manufacture used for Chinese export watercolours. As Craig Clunas explains, “the ubiquity of Whatman paper in Canton in the years from about 1790 to 1820 can perhaps be explained by James Whatman the Younger's close personal ties with the East India Company”.¹⁵ With the intercession of his brother-in-law Jacob Bosanquet, who became a member of the Court of Directors in 1782, James Whatman the Younger (1741-1798) obtained the position of stationer to the Company, but he began to date the moulds in 1794. After its initiator's death, the watermark “J. Whatman” continued to be used by the firm of Hollingsworth and Balston, and for this reason it is possible to find sheets with late dates, such as the one in Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 12.

¹⁵ Cf. Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984, p. 45.

The pedlars represented in these leaves are mostly depicted dealing with a customer. Some of them seem to be door-to-door salesmen. In an unusual evening scene, a sweetmeat seller (fig. 5.10, a) is showing his merchandise to a boy, while the child's mother is waiting on the doorstep, holding a small torch to lighten the dark street. Another illustration presents a flower seller (fig. 5.10, b) carrying a basket of flowers on one arm and offering some little flowers to a woman who is coming out from behind a peculiar door made of bamboo canes and straw.

Among the watercolours of this set there is also one with the very popular, ubiquitous image of a peep-show (fig. 5.10, c). Street entertainers formed a big professional category, and easily attracted the attention of passers-by, who particularly appreciated not only the puppet drama and the peep-show, but also the performances of jugglers and acrobats.

Some scenes of characteristic entertainments are contained in the sets Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 25 and Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 26, both donated to the British Museum by Miss Reeves in 1877. These two series of 19 leaves each are identical in content, though they present a few minor differences. The sheets of Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 25 measure 35.7 x 38.3 cm, and are made of thin Chinese paper of not particularly good quality; the drawings in black ink are sketched with thick, irregular lines and there are no captions. The illustrations of Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 26 are on sheets of more resistant and whiter paper, measuring 40 x 45 cm; the ink lines are finer and more carefully traced, and each image is accompanied by a brief written description underneath. Hence, it seems that the former may have been used as a draft copy for the latter, which could represent the final version of the compositions, though not coloured yet. The two sets are interesting because besides usual images of pedlars, they include images of bizarre entertainers, such as an animal trainer with a performing dog and a showman with a monkey as assistant. Moreover, there are also scenes of forms of entertainment with a long, ancient tradition. On a leaf, two people are enjoying the melodies sung by a young blind musician, while she accompanies herself with the rhythmic sound of a 'wooden fish' (muyu 木鱼), a percussion instrument originally used by Buddhist priests to beat rhythm when chanting scriptures. Han tomb reliefs and pottery figurines widely document the importance of music as amusement in feasts and banquets, and as individual leisure-time pursuit (fig. 5.11, a). It is likely - as Kenneth J. DeWoskin suggests - that in early times musicians at the service of wealthy families were slaves, and that some of them may have been intentionally

blinded in their early years to enhance their musical skills.¹⁶ There is no indication of such practice in Han texts, but in this respect, it could be noticed that the image of the blind poet and musician was a *topos* in other ancient cultures, as well. In ancient Greek culture the blind *aoidos* – poet and singer – was considered as directly inspired in his art by the gods. A famous example is the court singer Demodocus – described in the eighth book of the Greek epic poem *Odyssey* of the 8th century BC – who lived in the town of the semi-mythical Phaeacians, and sang both for the nobles in king Alcinous' palace and for the assembled public at the games held for Odysseus.¹⁷

On another leaf of the two British Museum albums under discussion, two men and a boy with a raptured, fascinated expression are listening to an old storyteller (fig. 5.12) who is “narrating stories of things past and present” (*tanjinshuogu* 談今說古), as the caption in the leaf belonging to Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 26 explains. In ancient China, storytellers had an important role not only as entertainers, but also because, at a time when written records were still limited, they contributed to the transmission of the oral literary traditions, which, otherwise, would have gone lost. Han figurines mostly represent storytellers as court jesters with grotesque features, who probably sang – rather than simply telling – stories, and acted out key parts while beating their drums (fig. 5.11, b).

Shops

While the albums examined so far are focused on the depiction of figures, tools and activities related to specific crafts and trades, the remaining albums of this group emphasise the places where the activities are performed and the goods are displayed, thus, providing illustrations of all sorts of shops.

Detailed descriptions of the picturesque and characteristic Chinese shops are given in the accounts of Downing and Tiffany. The former begins his report presenting Old

¹⁶ See Kenneth J. DeWoskin, “Music and Voices from the Han Tombs”, in Lucy Lim, ed., *Stories from China's Past*, The Chinese Culture Foundation of San Francisco, 1987, p. 67.

¹⁷ The figure of Demodocus and the fundamental social, artistic and political role of the *aoidos* in ancient Greek culture, as musician, entertainer, diffuser of traditions, political ideas, values and moral principles, are discussed in Mario Pintacuda and Roberta Trombino, *Hellenes*, Volume 1, Tome 1, *Antologia omerica*, Firenze, Palumbo Editore, 1998, pp. 329-332.

and New China streets, where the foreigners were allowed to go for their shopping. Not larger than an alley, the streets were always crowded "by vast numbers of coolies or porters, who carry on their shoulders a bamboo, having half of the load hanging in slings or baskets from either end", and on both sides they were lined by "native shops filled with a great variety of natural productions and curious manufactures".¹⁸ He also specifies that "some of the places are occupied by people who carry on one common branch of trade or manufacture", so that foreigners gave "names to many of these courts" – though "not adopted by the natives" – such as "Carpenter Square, Picture Street, Apothecary Row".¹⁹ Particularly interesting in Downing's account is the description of the shopkeepers' attitude. He writes that when a foreign customer entered a shop, the dealer immediately shut the door, "as if he was afraid of the passers-by seeing his valuables. This is a common trick, done for the purpose of giving you a high opinion of what you may be going to see", but it is also suggested that "the door may be shut to prevent your running away with the goods".²⁰ Then, when the deal was concluded and the customer was leaving the shop, the shopkeeper usually said goodbye with a disappointed expression on his face, just to pretend that the purchase had been more advantageous for the foreigner rather than for himself, whereas, in reality, he knew that he had gained his own satisfactory profit.

While Downing's description highlights the aspect of negotiations, Tiffany concentrates the attention on the external appearance and the internal arrangement of the shops. He explains that, generally of a small size, they all had a very similar two-storey structure. The lower storey was often built of bricks, and raised one or two steps from the street level, with shop signs hanging on posts on either side of the door. Inside, "goods are displayed on shelves or in glass cases on two sides and behind the shopman, who has his counter opposite to the door".²¹ Tiffany also notices that "every shopkeeper has an abacus, called in Chinese a swanpan...consisting of a number of balls on wires, and set in square moulding like billiard counts".²² The upper floor, usually built of wood, was allocated for the living quarters of the shopkeeper and his family.

¹⁸ See C. Toogood Downing, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²¹ See Osmond Tiffany, Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 61.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 62. The transliteration "swanpan" stands for *suanpan* 算盤.

The information provided by the foreign visitors is entirely confirmed by the hundreds of album leaves illustrating shops, preserved at the British Museum, which represent only a small part of what must have been the whole production.

The albums Ch. Ptg. 406 and Ch. Ptg. 407 are parts of the same series, containing the leaves from 1 to 100 and from 101 to 200 respectively. The sheets, all numbered and with a descriptive Chinese inscription at the bottom, each measure 37.9 x 49.5 cm. The albums are both provided with a separate list of English captions for each illustration, written on English paper watermarked "J. Whatman 1821". Thus, it may be reasonably assumed that the series was executed not long after this date. The drawings, probably meant to be models for watercolours, are traced in an approximate way, especially as far as the architectural elements and small objects are concerned: the ink lines, of irregular thickness, are not precise and completely straight, overlapping and crossing each others in some points; blurs and corrections are also evident. However, these illustrations give a very clear idea of the structure and environment of the shops, the front of which is almost completely open – with only a low brick wall on the two sides or just on one side of the entrance – so that the viewer has a full view of the inside. In most instances, the shopkeeper, standing behind the counter, is keeping the accounts, arranging the merchandise, or dealing with a customer, while through an opening at the rear it is often possible to see the workshop with some implements and, sometimes, an assistant at work. In the illustration of a shop selling colours, in Ch. Ptg. 406 (fig. 5.13), for example, in the right corner at the bottom there is the access to a rear room where can be spotted peculiar devices and a sort of big bowl probably used to prepare the pigments. In the front room all the boxes and pots are placed in good order on the shelves, each of them bearing a label describing the content; the shopkeeper is inspecting a pot of green colour, while his assistant is calmly smoking a long pipe. Similarly, on the leaf numbered 103 in Ch. Ptg. 407, depicting a glass shop (fig. 5.14), the workshop is visible in the right corner, while in the foreground, glass containers of different shapes are systematically displayed on the shelves. At the counter, the shopkeeper is showing some glass bowls to a client, who is carefully observing one of them.

The illustrations of set Ch. Ptg. 411 follow a pattern similar to that of the previous albums, but the scenes tend to be more animated, with more figures depicted in each shop. On the cover of the album there is clearly stated "Outlines of the Coloured Shops", thus indicating that the 76 ink drawings bound together were master copies

for watercolours. Although the elements of the images are quite schematic and essential, they are traced with precise and regular lines. The leaves measure 26.7 x 37.6 cm and some of them bear the Reeves coat-of-arms with a dragon's head emerging behind a mural crown, which was the one stamped on the drawings commissioned during the first two tours of John Reeves in Canton, between 1812 and 1824. Therefore, this feature allows to suppose that the album was executed approximately over the same span of time as that suggested for Ch. Ptg. 406 and Ch. Ptg. 407.

Among the most interesting images in Ch. Ptg. 411, there is the representation of a shop of gold and silver jewels (fig. 5.15, a), where a few more details about the shops' general structure and arrangement can be recognised. Because of the precious nature of the articles, only a few are displayed, and most of them are kept in drawers in the back, behind the counter. A central square area of the ceiling is open, and through it, parts of the balcony on the first floor can be seen; a flight of stairs leading upstairs is also clearly visible at the rear of the shop. In the foreground, on the left wall, there is a little shrine dedicated to a protecting divinity, as can be understood from the inscription in the wall niche and the hanging scroll with couplets on either side of the niche, all auguring constant prosperity and richness. This shrine, also displaying an altar table, candlesticks and an incense burner, is one of the most elaborate, but in other shops often occurs a simple, small niche in the wall, or in a part of the counter.

Most of the interiors illustrated in the series having shops as the theme presented products of typical Chinese manufacture. Hence, such albums could be used by the western traders as 'catalogues' displaying the articles available for purchase. An example is the porcelain shop (fig. 5.15, b) included in Ch. Ptg. 411: a wide range of porcelain pieces – such as cups, plates, vases, jars and figurines – readily identifiable by the collectors of China trade porcelains are arrayed on the shelves. A customer is negotiating with the shopkeeper, while his servant is waiting for him. Meanwhile, a shop assistant is carrying a pile of bowls, ready to be displayed, and another assistant is writing notes in the rear room, where the rest of the merchandise is stored. Shops of the same kind are those selling lacquerware, filled with boxes, screens and oddities of all sorts, or those selling bamboo furniture, offering beds, chairs, tables, desks, bookcases, benches, and other peculiar items.

Shops with characteristic Chinese products are also depicted in the set Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 29, originally part of the Reeves collection, too. The 26 leaves, measuring 29.5 x 39.5 cm, are not in good condition, and the drawings in thick black ink are very schematic, with figures often just quickly sketched. Some illustrate significant Chinese export items, like silk, straw mats, and, in particular, tea (fig. 5.16), displayed on shelves in rows of containers of various sizes, which, in the finished watercolour, would bear the names of different qualities of tea-leaves. Some other drawings represent common goods of usual consumption in Chinese daily life, such those of the food shop, the druggist's shop, the fish shop, and the incense shop. However, it is worth noticing the presence, among all these retailers, of one selling "foreign goods". Although not very frequent, similar images can be found in other albums, and show some curiosity and interest from the Chinese side towards 'exotic articles'. The content of these shops is extremely various; as H. A. Crosby Forbes specifies, the wide range of western-made products included rifles, swords, watches, knives, glass objects, wine bottles and fabrics.

Among all the shops represented in watercolours and described in written accounts, those specialised in the retail of paintings are of particular importance, as essential documents about the activity of Chinese painters working for the western market. In this regard, the watercolour of Tingqua's studio is well-known, existing in quite a number of copies, though none of them is in the albums of the British Museum's collection. Tingqua (active: 1830s-1870) is reported to be "the best known, and possibly the most proficient" of the watercolourists in Canton during the mid-19th century.²³ Thus, it seems reasonable that his big workshop in New China street (fig. 5.17) was considered as worth depicting. The different versions of this subject – with or without the name "Tingqua" written in block letters across the top – vary only in a few small details. An exhaustive description of this scene, the original of which was executed by the painter himself, is given by Crossman: in the studio, on the first or second floor above the shop, three of Tingqua's assistants are painting, with an extremely concentrated expression; along the walls are tiers of landscape paintings, port views, portraits, and figure studies, all representative of the production of the artist and its workshop.²⁴

²³ Cf. C. Crossman, *The China Trade*, Princeton, The Pyne Press, 1972, p. 106.

²⁴ For the complete description of Tingqua's studio cf. *ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

In the *Chinese Repository*,²⁵ a periodical issued at Canton between 1833 and 1851, and reporting the daily life of westerners in China, it is stated that Tingqua was the younger brother of Lam Qua (active: 1820-1855), another honoured painter working for the western market, specialised in oil painting. The latter is described by Tiffany as the “prince of Canton limners”.²⁶ Furthermore, Downing writes that he was the “pupil of Mr Chinnery, of Macao, and from him received instructions sufficient to enable him to paint in a tolerable manner after the European fashion”.²⁷ The available data do not allow to establish whether this was the case or not, but, as Patrick Conner points out, there was an ambiguous relationship of cooperation and rivalry between the two artists.²⁸ Only one watercolour of the façade of the building housing Lam Qua’s studio has been found so far; it is identified from the sign that reads “Lam Qua Face Painter” hanging from a supporting post (fig. 5.18). However, his headquarters are profusely described by Downing. At the top of the two-storey building there was the painter’s own studio; on the first floor was situated the workshop, where his assistants worked; while the ground floor was occupied by the proper shop, “where the finished articles are exposed for sale...arrayed according to their value in piles one upon the other, in glass cases placed around the room”.²⁹ Besides the long description of the various parts of the building, Downing accurately reports the entire process of producing watercolours, from the choice of the paper, the sizing with a solution of alum,³⁰ the tracing of the outline, the preparation of colours and, finally, their application.

The strong imprint left by Chinese export watercolours, in general, and by the watercolours depicting crafts, trades and shops, in particular, can be detected in some views of Canton by European painters, who were apparently inspired by the China Trade illustrations. An example is the watercolour of a grocer’s shop (fig. 5.19) executed by William Prinsep³¹ (1794-1874). As Conner emphasises, he “has depicted

²⁵ See E. C. Bridgman and S. W. Williams, eds., *Chinese Repository*, Canton, vol. XVI, no. 5, May 1847.

²⁶ See Tiffany, op. cit., p. 85.

²⁷ See Downing, op. cit., pp. 90-91. The whole description of Lam Qua’s shop and the painting techniques used in his workshop covers nine pages, from p. 90 to p. 98.

²⁸ About the connection between Lam Qua and George Chinnery see Patrick Conner, *George Chinnery 1774-1852*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors’ Club Ltd., 1993, pp. 169-170.

²⁹ See Downing, op. cit. pp. 91-93.

³⁰ A double sulphate of aluminium and another element, especially potassium, which - as Downing explains - makes the paper more fit to receive the colours and protect coats of paint from moisture.

³¹ In 1817, the English businessman and painter William Prinsep left for India, where he became friends with Chinnery. In 1838 he visited Macao, where he saw Chinnery again, after the latter had

the shop as a Chinese artist would, with the shop's front parallel with the picture plane and the opening to the street filling the page".³²

By appreciating the artistic value of these albums, it must also be recognised that they are an important source of information about some aspects of the Chinese society of the 18th and 19th centuries. For instance, it emerges that differences in the clothing indicated distinctions in social status: shopkeepers wear a plain, long gown buttoning at the right; artisans wear shorter waist- or thigh- length jackets with trousers; manual workers wear a short jacket over trousers. Moreover, it can be easily noticed that women seldom appear, for, by custom, they rarely walked about in public or entered shops. A few can only be seen as customers in shops selling shoes, textiles, or ladies ornaments, but none is represented as directly involved in the retail business.

What is striking is the fact that the ink drawings and watercolours contained in these sets seem to be the pictures of scenes and places that can be encountered and found in some parts of China nowadays, such as the handful of traditional shops still surviving in Hong Kong. Therefore, the thousands of images of craftsmen, itinerant traders and shops diligently executed and copied time and again a few centuries ago bring to us the voices of a sort of 'fabled past', the echoes of which can still be heard today.

moved to China. In 1842, he returned back to Britain. He produced numerous watercolours and drawings of Indian and Chinese subjects.

³² See Patrick Conner, *The China Trade 1600-1860*, Brighton, The Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museum, 1986, p. 67.

Illustrations



Figure 5. 1 City market. Rubbing of pottery relief unearthed from Peng County in 1975. Eastern Han dynasty (25-220). 28 x 49. Xindu County Cultural Bureau.

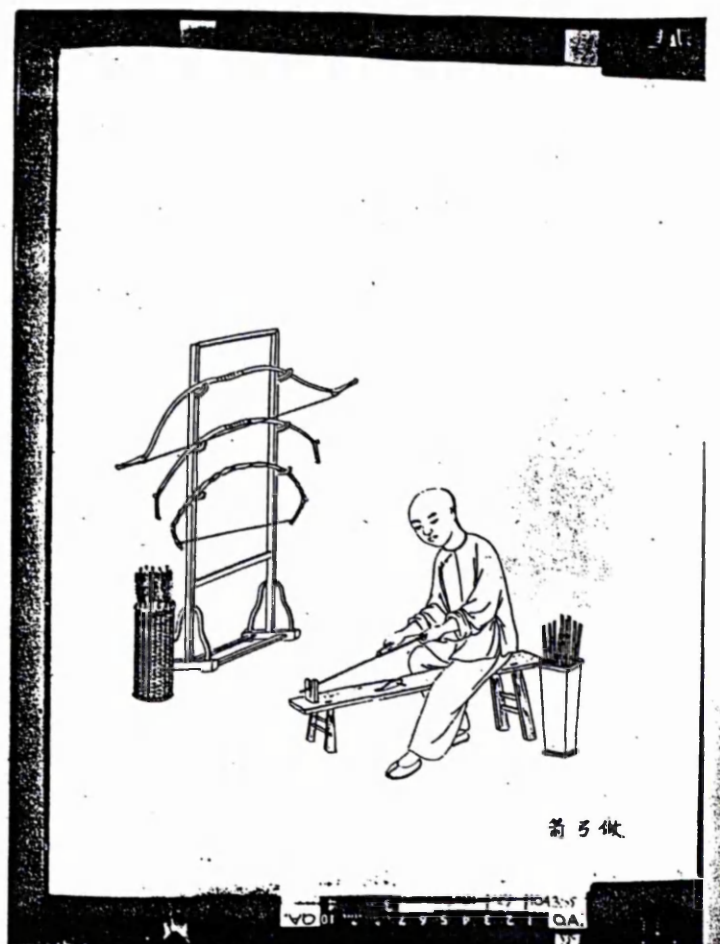
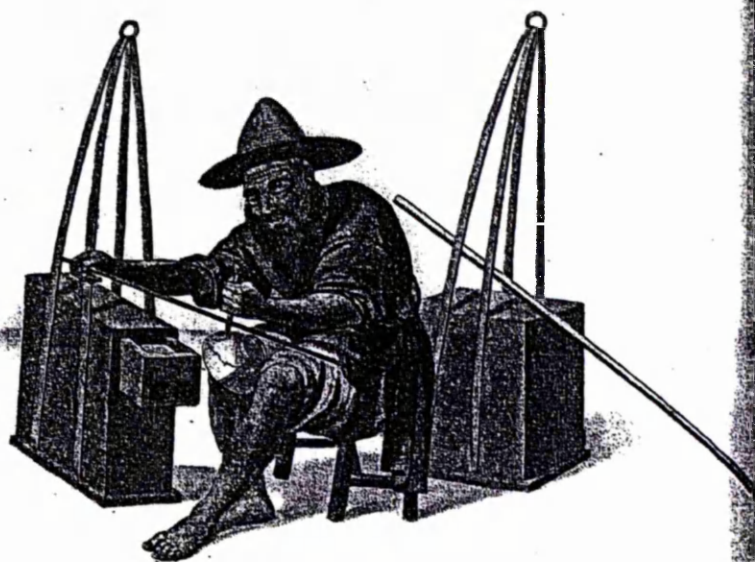


Figure 5. 2 Archery maker. Ink on paper. 38.7 x 29 cm. One of a set of 120. Ch. Ptg. 401. British Museum, London.

a



For Glass Cases, etc.

Printed by W. Miller, 1800

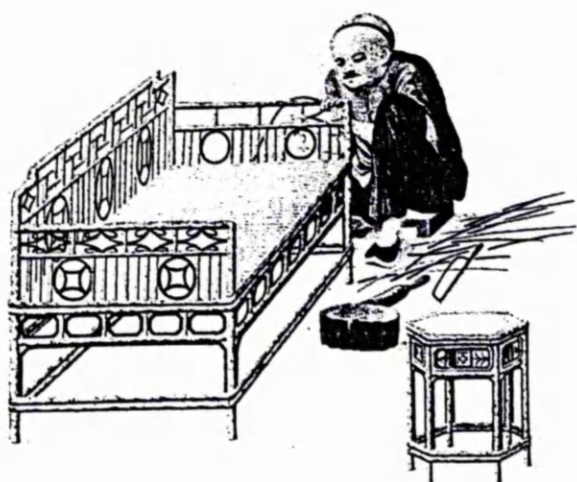
Published May 4, 1799, by W. Miller, Old Bond Street, London

b

Figure 5. 4 a) *Raccomodeur de Porcelaine*. Signed "Mary Conner". Pencil on paper. Early 19th century. 19 x 15.2 cm. Displayed at the exhibition *A Tale of Three Cities* held at Sotheby's, London, in 1997. b) Mender of porcelain. Stipple engraved plate. In George Henry Mason, *The Costume of China*, London, W. Miller, 1800.



Figure 5. 5 Frog-catcher. Ink and colours on paper. 36 x 29.8 cm. One of a set of 43. Ch. Ptg. 323. British Museum, London.



a



b



c

布織

Figure 5. 6 a) Maker of rattan furniture. b) Oil painter. c) Weaver. Ink and colours on paper. Three of a set of 100. Add. 207. British Museum, London.

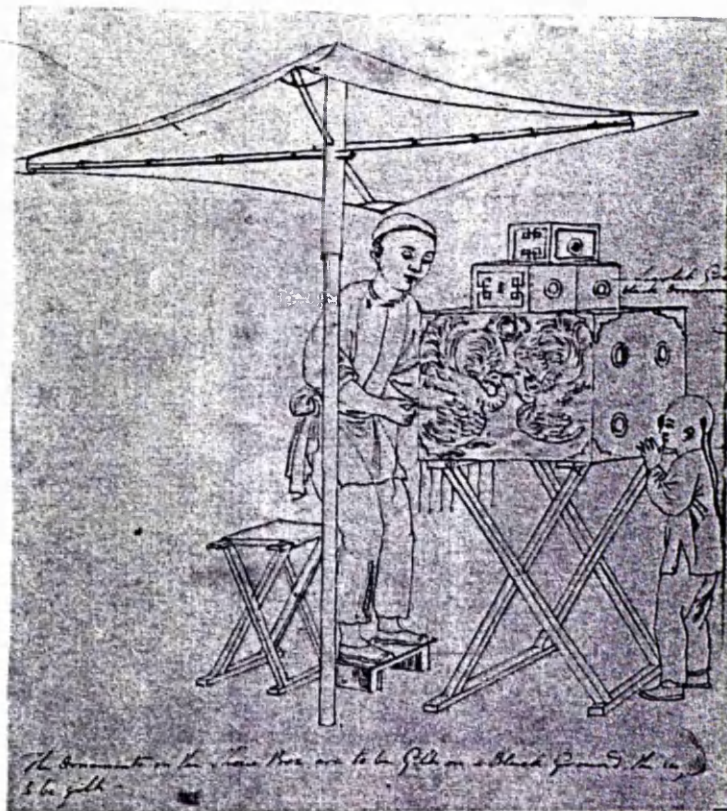


Figure 5. 7 Peep-show. Ink on paper. 26 x 22.3 cm. One of a set of 50. Add. 211. British Museum, London.



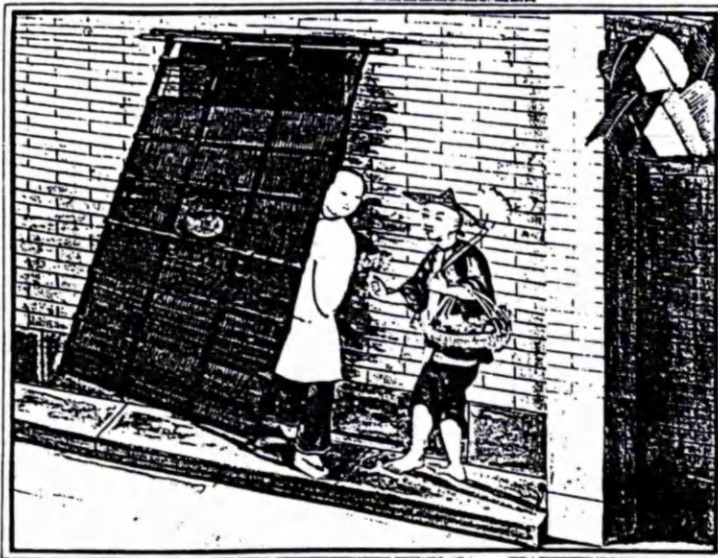
Figure 5. 8 Barber. Watercolours on paper. 23.7 x 33 cm. One of a set of 30. Add. 179. British Museum, London.



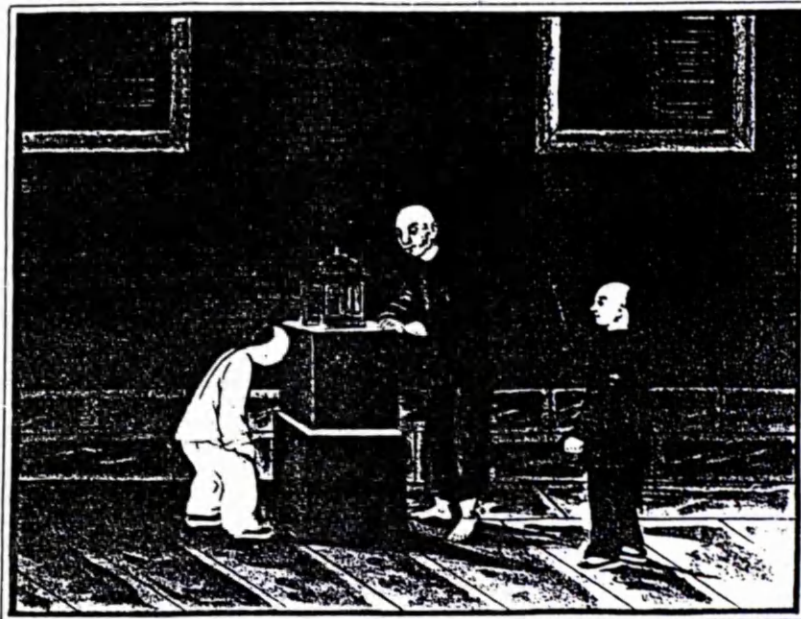
Figure 5. 9 a) Auguste Borget. Interior of a barber's shop. ca. 1838-1839. Sold at auction by Sotheby's, Hong Kong, December 4, 1978. b) George Chinnery. A Chinese barber. Oils. Dated 1826. Private collection.



a

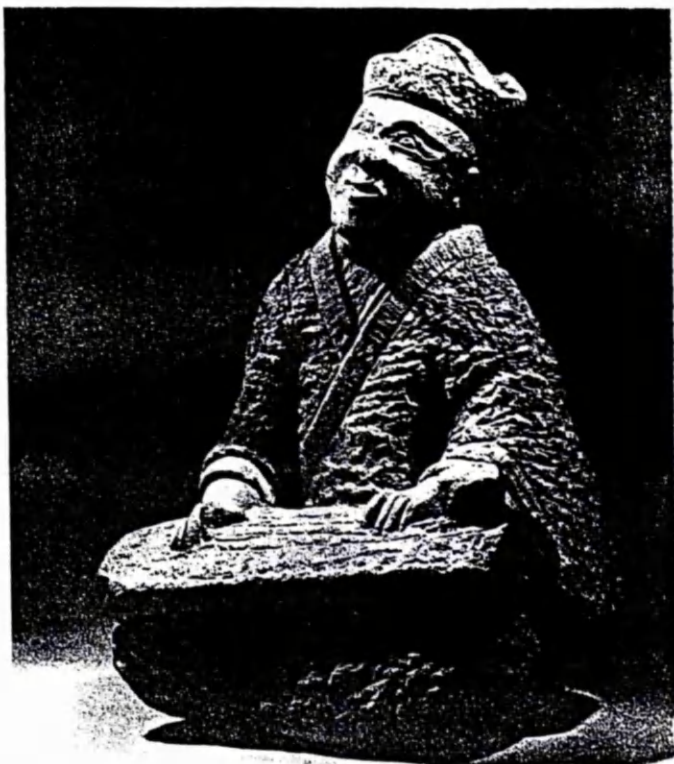


b



c

Figure 5. 10 a) Sweetmeat seller. b) Flower seller. c) Peep-show. Watercolours on paper. 23.6 x 28.6 cm. Three of a set of 12. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 12. British Museum, London.

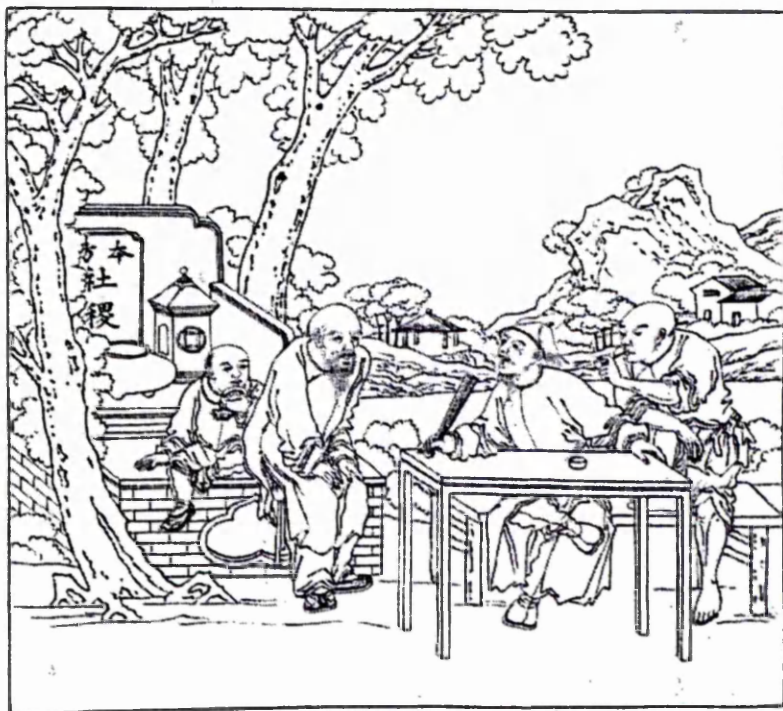


a



b

Figure 5. 11 a) Musician playing *qin* zither. Stone figurine unearthed from Emei County in 1977. Eastern Han Dynasty. Height: 57 cm; width: 40 cm. Sichuan Provincial Museum. b) Storyteller. Pottery figurine unearthed from Xindu County in 1982. Height: 51 cm. Sichuan Provincial Museum.



1877, 7-14, 01415

Figure 5. 12 Storyteller. Ink on paper. 40 x 45 cm. One of a set of 19. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 26. British Museum, London.

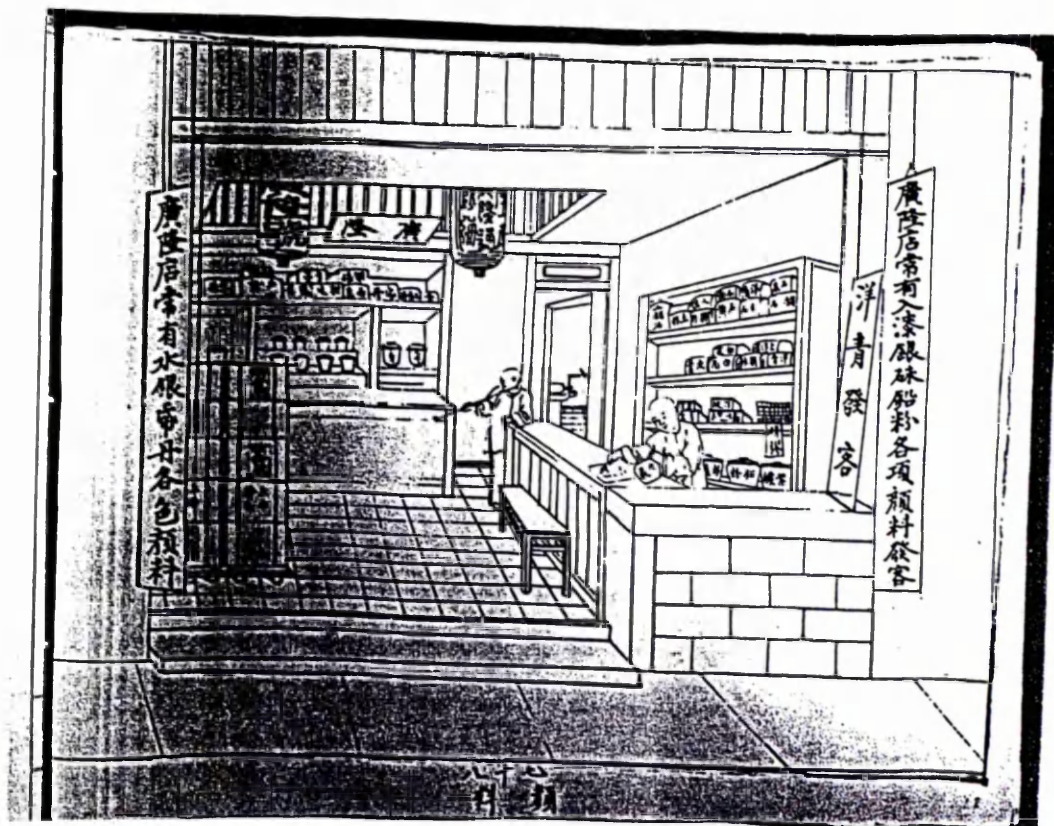


Figure 5. 13 Colours shop. Ink on paper. 37.3 x 49.5 cm. One of a set of 100. Ch. Ptg. 406. British Museum, London.

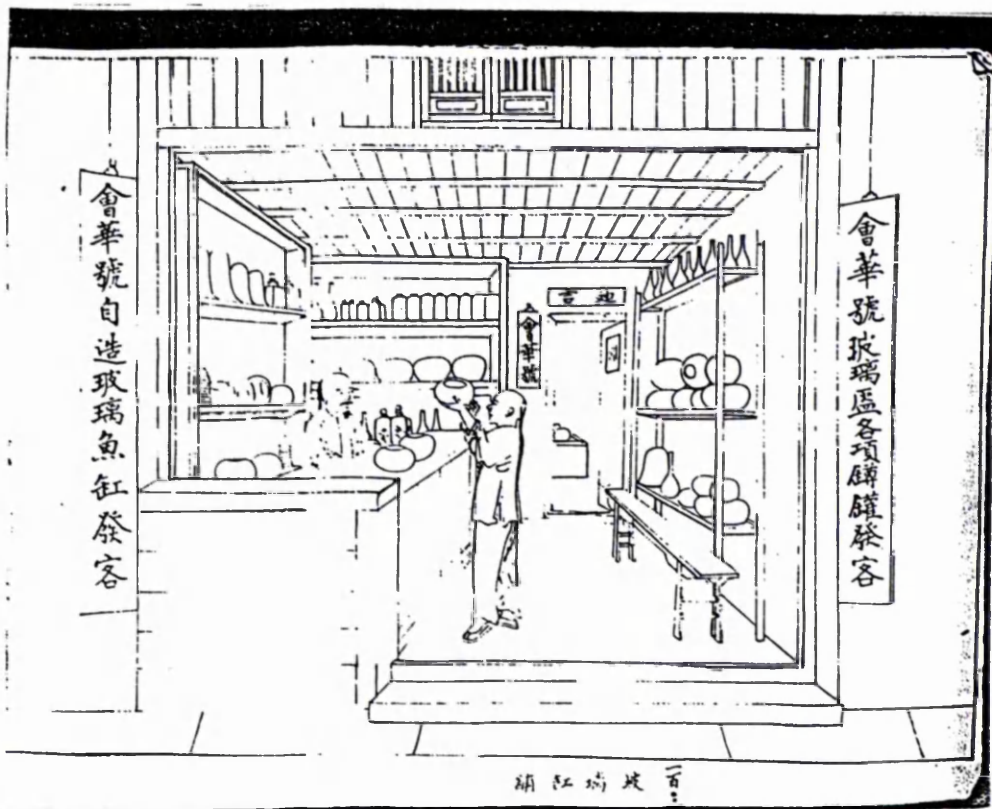
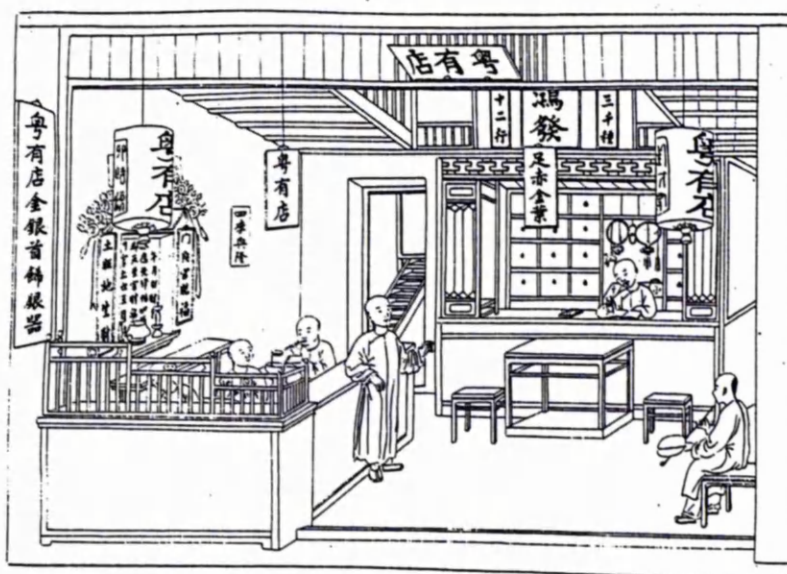
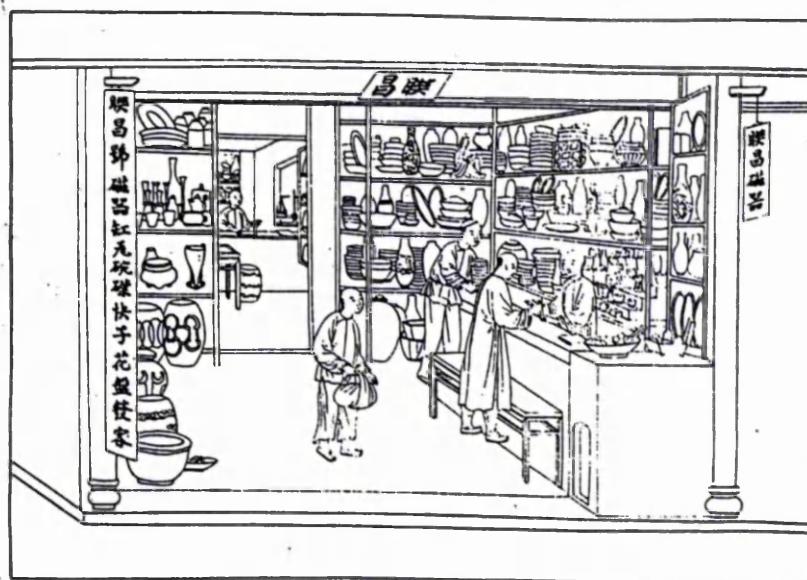


Figure 5. 14 Glass shop. Ink on paper. 37.3 x 49.5 cm. One of a set of 100. Ch. Ptg. 407. British Museum, London.



a



b

Figure 5. 15 a) Jewellery shop. b) Porcelain shop. Ink on paper. 26.7 x 37.6 cm. Two of a set of 76. Ch. Ptg. 411. British Museum, London.

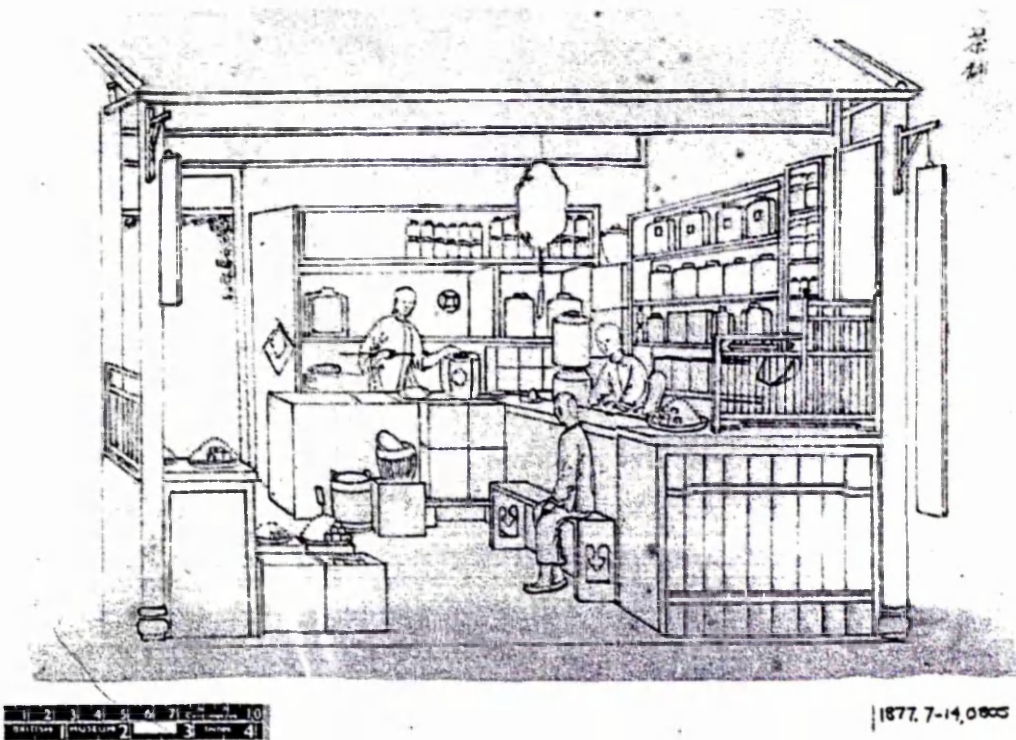


Figure 5. 16 Tea shop. Ink on paper. 29.5 x 39.5 cm. One of a set of 26. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 29. British Museum, London.



Figure 5. 17 Tingqua. Tingqua's studio. Gouache on paper. ca. 1855. 17.2 x 25.4 cm. Carl L. Crossman's Collection.

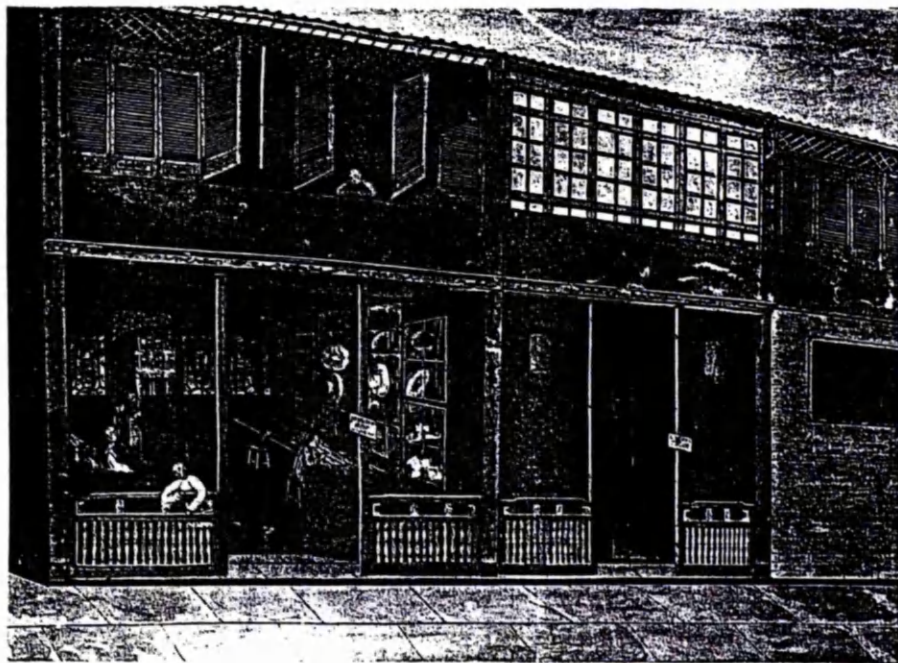


Figure 5. 18 Lam Qua's studio. Gouache on paper. ca. 1830. 28 x 37 cm. Collection of the Peabody Museum of Salem.

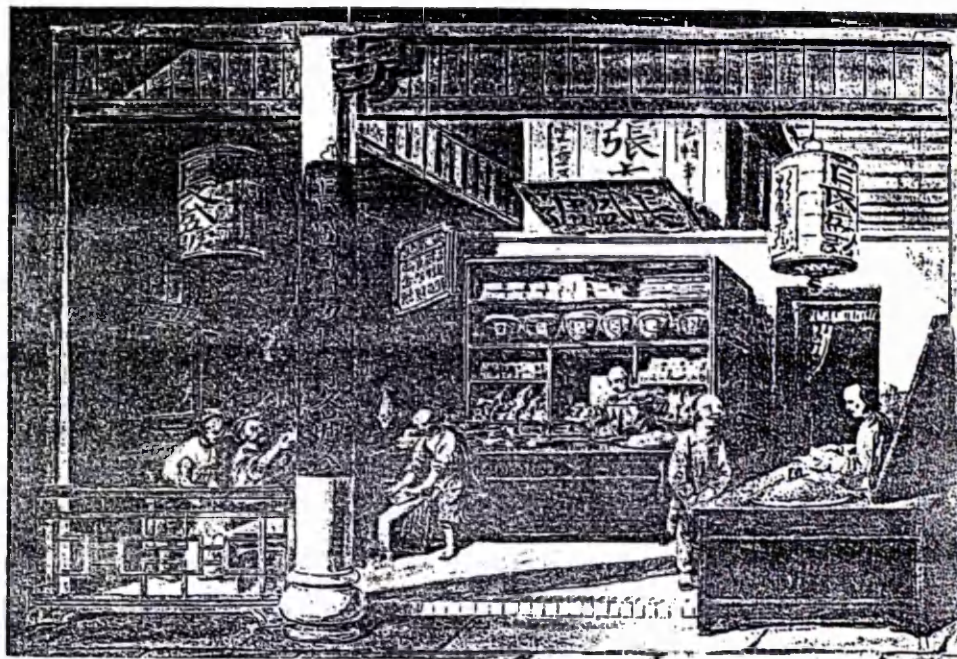


Figure 5. 19 William Prinsep. Grocer's shop. Watercolours on paper. 21.6 x 30.5 cm. Second quarter of the 19th century. Collection of HSBC.

CHAPTER 6

RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS

Among the British Museum's Chinese export watercolours there are six sets representing religious themes. So far, export albums on this subject have not been treated by any of the more or less specific publications on Chinese export art, and only a few images of album leaves of this kind have appeared – though without any comment – on the catalogues of the auction houses dealing in oriental works of art. This lack of documentation is quite surprising and unjustified, for such paintings, and in particular the specimens at the British Museum, although not very numerous, are generally well executed and present Chinese religious customs and beliefs in an interesting, appealing way.

According to the depicted theme, the religious series can be divided into two categories: one includes album leaves presenting deities and legendary heroes; the other consists of sets describing cult places and practices. By analysing all the various images of both categories, it is possible to draw up a picture of the complex structure of Chinese religious sphere, with its intermingling of popular and canonical conventions, philosophical and political implications, and historical and mythological elements.

Sets about gods and legendary figures are usually composed of pictures, the focus of which is an idol drawn with distinctive attire, attributes and symbols, in the middle of the leaf against a plain background. Sometimes the Chinese name is given underneath, but, in any case, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to understand the meaning of these images without considering first the history and characteristics of the Chinese mythology and religious cults.

In every primitive culture the belief in supernatural beings or powers comes out of the need to explain natural phenomena, such as storms, fire, illnesses and death. Deities and spirits of ancestors are worshipped in order to make them benevolent and to obtain their protection and assistance for the welfare of human beings. In this regard, Chinese ancient civilization was no exception.

The oracular bones of the Longshan Neolithic culture¹ are probably the earliest evidence of an attempt of communication between the human and supernatural worlds with the supposed mediation of the ancestors. These divinatory practices were made more elaborate and systematic during the Shang dynasty (ca. 18th – 11th century BC). At that time, questions about rain or crops, prospects for hunting, advisability of royal travel or military campaigning were inscribed on cattle scapulae and turtle shells. A circular pit, which might be overlain by an oval one, was then made on the back of the bone and a heated bronze point was applied to the edge of the pit. The resultant cracks on the front side of the bone, considered as the manifestation of a divine advice, were interpreted by an augur or by the Shang king himself.

The most ancient extant literary sources about Chinese mythology are represented by two works of the eighth century BC.² The *Shujing* 书经 (Book of History), reports stories about the first legendary emperors of China, Yao and Shun, together with political treatises, accounts about the deeds of ancient sovereigns and ministers, geographic descriptions, and so on. The *Shijing* 诗经 (Book of Songs), a collection of 305 poems, hymns and songs, gives access to the archaic mentality and beliefs of common people and aristocracy, as well as to some of the first myths of Chinese tradition, concerning, for instance, the origin of the Shang and Zhou lineages, and the introduction of the cultivation of cereals by the legendary God of Millet Houji 后稷.

From the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–222 BC) onwards, fantastic stories and legends developed more and more in all sorts of literary works – dynastic histories, philosophical treatises, poetic anthologies, encyclopaedias – over the centuries.³

As far as the iconographic materials are concerned, some images of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic creatures on the bronze ritual vessels of the Shang dynasty are considered the most ancient identifiable deities, to which a name and a function can be assigned with the help of later texts. In the following centuries, these idealized fantastic figures became more and more concrete in people's imagination, and

¹ The Longshan culture flourished in Shaanxi, Henan and Shandong between the second half of the third millennium BC and the beginning of the second millennium BC.

² Although the extant editions of both the *Shujing* and the *Shijing* are dated to the Han dynasty (206BC – 220 AD), they were originally compiled in the first half of the first millennium BC, probably as early as the eighth century BC. Some chapters of the *Shujing* are generally recognised as having been composed in the late 11th century BC (see M. Loewe, ed. *Early Chinese Texts*, Berkeley, 1993, pp. 376-380).

³ A list of the most important ancient Chinese sources about myths and legends is provided by Rémi Mathieu in his *Anthologie des mythes et légendes de la Chine ancienne*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989, pp. 239-253.

acquired more and more defined forms. By the Han dynasty, mythology and folklore were fully represented especially in funerary art. Stories of mythological figures frequently mentioned in ancient texts, and probably also widely circulated in folk tradition, were common themes portrayed in Han tomb tiles, bronze mirrors and wall paintings. All these early representations of gods, spirits and strange beasts constitute the foundation for the development of a flourishing and prolific production of religious painting, linked in particular to the tradition of Chinese Buddhist art and Taoist art.

This consideration leads to one of the fundamental issues regarding the complexity of Chinese religious beliefs and pantheons. Taoism and Confucianism, the two indigenous philosophical and religious systems, whose respective founders, Laozi and Confucius, lived during the sixth century BC, had always been debating about the authenticity and interpretation of myths. The former, aiming at immortality and at a life in complete harmony with nature, incorporated many deities from the mythological tradition as embodiments of natural powers, and also included legendary heroes as models of wisdom and rectitude. The latter, all concentrated on the observance of funerary ceremonies and the worship of the spirits of ancestors, warned people against the faith in fantastic figures and false legends, which were a threat and a destabilising factor to the ritualised order of social life.⁴ In this context, Buddhism, which originated in India⁵ and arrived in China via Central Asia in the first century AD, gradually found its own place and emerged as a challenge to the native systems.

The coexistence of these three systems, known collectively as the Three Teachings, or *San Jiao* 三教, generated the need for a sort of syncretism, which can also be detected in the art of different periods. Laozi, Confucius and Buddha appear together in paintings of as early as the Five Dynasties (907-960). As Wu Tung states, the further attempt by the Song dynasty (960-1279) literati to synthesize the Three Teachings is manifested in an art that reflects “a mixture of the Confucian reverence

⁴ In this regard, it is interesting to mention what Rémi Mathieu observes about the ambiguity of this “Confucian rationalism”. He points out how the Confucian historian Sima Qian (?145-?86 BC) in his historical compilation *Shiji* 史記 (Historical Records) suggests not to trust some accounts – ‘heterodox’ in his eyes – about the origin of ancient sovereigns, providing in his turn what he believes is the true version of the facts, which actually consists of stories as legendary and fantastic as the others. See R. Mathieu, op. cit., p. 13. See also the first section of the *Shiji*, where Sima Qian begins his account with a description of the marvellous deeds and reigns of the legendary “Five Emperors” (consult, for example, the Chinese version published in 1982: Beijing, Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 10 volumes).

⁵ The founder of Buddhism, Siddharta Gautama, also lived in the sixth century BC.

for humanity and antiquity, Daoist beliefs in spontaneous creativity, and Chan Buddhist meditative practices".⁶ Despite continuous rivalries and tensions, a mutual exchange of elements, with borrowings and adaptations on each side, was inevitable, and, as one of the results, many gods and spirits were equally venerated by the adherents of the Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist persuasions.

This brief and very simplified presentation of the intricate and composite picture of deity worship in China is an indispensable introduction to the discussion about the export watercolours with religious themes. As a matter of fact, this peculiar background accounts for the crowd of gods, immortals and spirits originally belonging to different beliefs but illustrated together in the sets under examination.

At this point, it is necessary to stress another essential characteristic of the images produced for the foreign market: their models were not the paintings of the highly mystic and intellectual religious art of literati and monks. Instead, they were directly inspired by a popular form of religious art. Being commercial products, the album leaves were painted by professional artists and artisans of the same kind of those who executed the traditional paper gods. This peculiar expression of folk art, consisting of images of deities printed in ink lines on coloured paper, had probably its origin in cult activities of early times, but it seems that it began to flourish during the Tang dynasty.⁷ The prints were either burnt in religious ceremonies,⁸ or hung in the houses as protection against evil spirits, pasted on doors, employed as charms and as objects for household devotion. As it is still the custom nowadays, from the Tang dynasty on, prints depicting gods, as well as heroes, human desires for happiness, prosperity and long life, family and farm scenes, started to be used to decorate houses as auspicious signs especially during the celebrations for the Chinese New Year.⁹

Whatever the use of paper gods, they mirrored the desires and needs of the common people, such as the hopes for a good fortune, a bumper harvest, a sound and strong son, an official promotion, a peaceful and healthy family. Thus, a panorama of society unfolds itself in the imagery of these prints, which also present a popular view of the secular and religious worlds. It is from such representations of hundreds

⁶ Cf. Wu Tung, *Tales from the Land of Dragons*, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1997, p. 20.

⁷ For a brief discussion on the origin and development of paper gods see Wang Shucun, *Paper Joss*, Beijing, New World Press, 1992, pp. 9-13.

⁸ This procedure of burning the prints is variously interpreted. According to Wang Shucun, the paper gods were burnt as symbolic offerings. See Wang Shucun, op. cit., p. 10. Anne S. Goodrich suggests that they were burnt as means for transporting the deity represented to heaven. See Anne S. Goodrich, *Peking Paper Gods*, Nettetal, Steyler Verlag, 1991, p. 23.

⁹ The prints used for this purpose are called *nianhua* 年画 (New Year pictures).

of deities, an endless gallery of meditative, benign, stern, exotic figures, that the albums of Canton workshops derive their style and iconography.

Gods and legendary figures

Of the six sets about religious subjects preserved at the British Museum, five have gods and legendary figures as subject matter. The investigation of the illustrations follows two directions. From an iconographic point of view, it is aimed at establishing a certain kind of uniformity in the pantheon displayed in different albums. From a stylistic point of view, it is studied whether there are common models for the representation of the same figures, and how these images conform to, or differ from traditional Chinese depictions of these same subjects.

Ch. Ptg, 413 Folder 2 is likely to be the earliest set of the group. It was acquired by the British Museum in 1877, but four of the overall five paintings are executed on English paper watermarked "J. Whatman 1794". Hence, although not completely proved, it is possible that the watercolours under discussion were produced in the very last years of the 18th century. The hypothesis of an early date is also corroborated by the very fine quality of the drawings. Lines are neat and flowing, colours are brilliant and skilfully applied. Each figure is rendered with a great attention to facial details and decorative patterns for objects and garments. All the elements, together with postures and movements, contribute to give expressiveness to the images. At the bottom of each leaf is centred an inscription bearing the Chinese name of the god. The captions have to be read from right to left, and are written in black ink in a very clear and precise handwriting. Next to each inscription there is also a note with the English translation written in pencil presumably by a British purchaser.

Each of the five leaves included in this set measures 46 x 37 cm. As albums of deities usually contained just figures without an apparent sequential order, it is difficult to establish how many leaves originally constituted a complete series. In this specific case, the identity of the depicted figures could be a key to the problem. The four illustrations on Whatman paper represent respectively the antithetical couple of the God of Fire and the God of Water, and the kindred couple of the God of Wind

and the God of Thunder. Thus, it may be assumed that they form a whole set on their own. The fifth illustration is on Chinese paper and represents the God of Thunder again. Its overall appearance is very similar to the other one, with only a few differences in colours and decorative motifs. However, as the drawing seems less accurate, with a less appealing effect, it could be considered as a model or preliminary sketch for the final, more elaborate version.

The deities depicted in this set, closely related to popular religion, were also assimilated by Taoists. They express Taoism's emphasis on the duality of natural and supernatural phenomena, and the Taoist conception of essential elements of nature, and of the interaction between humans and immortals. Emblematic examples of such expression are three paintings of the San Guan 三官 (Three Agents, or Rulers) – Agents of Earth, Heaven and Water – with their retinues, executed in the first half of the 12th century (Fig. 6.1), where, as it is common in Taoist art, the idea of vitality and animation of the natural world is rendered by portraying figures with a strong sense of movement.¹⁰

Following the traditional use of symbolism in paintings of this kind, in the watercolour set specific elements and colours emphasise the nature of each deity. In the first leaf, the prevailing colour is red. The God of Fire, whose Chinese name is Huode Xingjun 火德星君 (Star Ruler of the Virtue of Fire), is dressed in the uniform of a general bearing an alert facial expression and crowned by a flaming halo. This god, thought to be enemy of water, is not only in charge of the production of metal and weaponry, but also watches over the people, checking their evil and good deeds.

In the second leaf, in which the prevailing colour is a shade of greenish blue, the God of Water, also called Dragon King of the Sea (Hai Longwang 海龙王), is depicted as emerging through tumultuous waves, and although he has a human body, his facial traits present dragon-like features (fig. 6.2). The religious importance of the dragon, already testified by its representations on the bronze ritual vessels of the Shang dynasty (fig. 6.3), was particularly strong in Taoist belief, as this creature was a symbol of the yang (male, positive) cosmic force, as well as the vehicle of gods and transcendents. The Dragon King is in charge of rain, providing the water vital for vegetation, animals and human beings.

¹⁰ For a comment on these paintings see Wu Tung, *Tales from the Land of Dragons*, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1997, pp. 149-150.

Thunder and wind are parts of the process of giving rain and sunshine for the benefit of terrestrial life. This could explain the choice for the next two album leaves. In this regard, it is interesting to notice that in the Song painting mentioned above, the Agent of Water is also flanked by the Gods of Thunder and Rain.

The third leaf of the set, with its predominance of a greyish-black tone, is occupied by the God of Wind, popularly known as Fengbo 风伯 (Earl, or Count of Wind). He is depicted holding in his hands waving green flags, instead of the bag of wind seen in many traditional representations.

The God of Thunder (Leishen 雷神) is shown on the fourth leaf, where the prevailing colour is greyish-blue. He has got a man's body, but an owl's beak and claws. Like in most of the conventional depictions of this god, in one hand he holds a hammer with which he sends the thunderbolt – in the shape of a chisel – held in the other hand, in order to punish the wrongdoers by striking them.

More complicated is the religious scenery emerging from the set registered as Ch. Ptg. 435. It includes nine leaves, measuring 35 x 26 cm, in rather bad condition, damaged by dampness, with brittle paper and altered colours. Each leaf bears a Chinese caption containing the name of the god or a brief explanation of his function. The same inscription is copied on the back of the sheet, accompanied by a comment written in English. The album, which was also given the title *Shengui* 神鬼 (Gods and Spirits), appears as a mixture of folk Taoist and Buddhist deities.

Two album leaves are dedicated respectively to the Dragon Emperor of the Eastern Sea (Donghai Longwang 东海龙王) and the Dragon King of the Northern Sea (Beihai Longhuang 北海龙皇¹¹), giving evidence of the worship of many Dragon Kings, connected with water in different ways. The most important were the kings of the Eastern, Western, Southern and Northern Seas, which originally may have been all included in the album. Anne S. Goodrich explains that they developed from the Indian Nagas,¹² semi-divine beings of Hindu and Buddhist mythology, half human and half serpentine, associated with waters – rivers, lakes, seas, and wells – and generally regarded as guardians of treasures.

¹¹ As there is no textual reference to any "Longhuang", the character 'huang' 皇 stays – perhaps mistakenly – for 'wang' 王.

¹² In Sanskrit, 'Naga' means serpent. See Anne S. Goodrich, op. cit., p. 178.

The God of Thunder is also depicted with the same attributes as in Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 2, but here he is given the more popular name Leigong 雷公 (Duke of Thunder).

On other leaves there are painted figures of the most ancient Chinese mythological tradition. Of great importance is Pan'gu 盤古 (fig. 6.4), who is considered as the creator of the world. According to the version of the myth in the Song dynasty imperial encyclopaedia *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽, compiled under the direction of Li Fang (925-966), in the beginning the primordial Chaos was like a hen's egg, and neither Earth nor Heaven existed.¹³ From this egg, Pan'gu was born. The parts of the egg separated, the heavy elements forming the Earth, and the light, pure ones the Sky. For a period of eighteen thousand years, as Pan'gu was growing, the distance between Earth and Sky gradually increased at the same rate, so that his body always filled the space between the two. At the end of the process, the distance reached 90 li 里,¹⁴ but, despite this, Pan'gu is always represented as a dwarf clad either in leaves – as it is the case in the depiction of Ch. Ptg. 435 – or in a bearskin. On his death, the various parts of his body became different natural elements, though the exact details of these changes vary from text to text and from period to period.

The represented deities include not only supernatural beings, but also human beings who through their virtuous deeds have been transformed into gods. An example is the legendary figure of Suiren 燧人,¹⁵ who is said to have taught people to make fire by rubbing two sticks together, and to use fire for cooking. As a matter of fact, he is depicted sitting on a rock, holding two wooden sticks, one of which is lit, and the Chinese caption on the album leaf specifies “Suiren shi qu huo” 燧人氏取火, that is “Suiren obtains fire”.

The Chinese inscription “dou tian zhi fu” 都天致富, meaning “every day extremely rich”, accompanies the image of one of the numerous gods of wealth, though no name is given. In Chinese folklore, wealth was one of the five temporal desires traditionally pursued, together with good health, male offspring, virtue and social advancement, and many deities possess abilities connected with bestowing richness and prosperity. By comparing the image of the album leaf with illustrations of various gods of wealth – which often occur in the form of paper gods – it seems to

¹³ See *Taiping yulan*, in 12 volumes, Taipei, Xinxing shuju 新興書局, 1959, chapter 2, p. 134.

¹⁴ A li is a Chinese unit of length corresponding to 500 metres.

¹⁵ Sui 燧 means flint and also refers to an ancient tool used to produce fire.

correspond to the description of Caibao shen 财宝神 (God of Wealth), for, like this deity, the figure with long, thin and black hair and beard, sits sumptuously attired, holding a gold ingot in his left hand (fig. 6.5).

An example of the blending of Buddhist and Taoist elements is provided by another leaf of Ch. Ptg. 435 depicting Zhundi 准提, the Goddess of Light. The name derives from the Brahmanic¹⁶ deity Chundi or Cundi, which corresponds to Marichi - one of the twenty *devas*¹⁷ of Buddhism - literally meaning "ray of light". It is still unclear when precisely Taoists took over this deity from the Buddhists, giving her the name Doumu 斗母, Mother of the Dipper.¹⁸ As the image represented in the album leaf, she is usually shown sitting on a lotus throne; in her numerous hands - variably twelve or eighteen - she holds several attributes, including sacred weapons and vessels, and the symbols of sun and moon.

A purely Buddhist figure is the one of the Buddha of the Past (Guoqu Fo 过去佛), identified with Bhaisajyaguru Buddha, who grants healing from disease. He is portrayed in his conventional pose. The left hand palm is open, as if holding a medicine box, which is one of his usual attributes, but, at times, is omitted. According to the Buddhist doctrine of samsara, or transmigration, he is usually worshipped as part of a triad, together with the Buddha of the Present, represented by Sakyamuni, and the Buddha of the Future, known as Amithaba.

Purchased by the British Library in 1842, the set Add. 318 was transferred from the Egerton collection to the British Museum in 1962. The 24 album leaves, each measuring 42.8 x 28.2 cm, do not bear any inscriptions, but present the same stylistic characteristics of the other sets, with careful and detailed drawings, neat and precise outline, bright colours, lively figures and expressive faces. Most of the deities already seen in the previous albums occur in this set, as well. Some watercolours also emerge for the impression of delicacy and lightness that they suggest. This is the case of the illustration of a female deity on a lotus flower among the waves (fig. 6.6, a). It is plausible to assume that this is one of the manifestations of Guanyin Pusa 观音菩萨. The name being an abbreviation of Guan shi yin Pusa 观世音菩萨, literally means

¹⁶ Brahmanism is a religion of ancient India that takes its name both from the predominant position of the priestly class, the Brahmins, and from the importance given to Brahman, the supreme existence, source of all things.

¹⁷ Divinities identified with the forces of nature.

¹⁸ Anne S. Goodrich suggests that this could have happened in the seventh-eighth centuries. Cf. Anna S. Goodrich, op. cit., p. 231.

“Bodhisattva¹⁹ who attends to the cries of the world”, and is the Chinese translation of the term Avalokiteśvara. The image of Guanyin entered China from India wearing a small moustache and beard (fig. 6.6, b), as Avalokiteśvara was originally considered as the earthly manifestation of the self-born, eternal Buddha, Amithaba. But by the Song dynasty the representation had become female.²⁰ One interpretation of this development could be that the bodhisattva transcends sexual distinction, as he incorporates all the dualities in the sphere of temporal world. In the watercolour, she is depicted holding in one hand a willow branch, one of Guanyin’s distinguishing symbols, and in the other a vase containing the water of life that blots out all sins.

A similar image – but with the addition of a flying bird, another of Guanyin’s symbols – appears on a leaf of the set Add. 319 (fig. 6.7). This album with 37 leaves of various sizes, which was also acquired by the British Museum from the British Library in 1962, as the previous one, had entered the Egerton collection in 1844.

The way of representing figures and arranging compositions does not differ too much from that of Add. 318, indicating that export paintings of deities followed more or less strict conventions about style and iconography.

On every leaf of Add. 319, the name of the god who is portrayed is clearly stated. Besides all the figures described in the other sets, there are some particularly important deities, representative of both popular mythology and specific religions.

The series opens with Nüwa 女媧 (fig. 6.8, a), a prominent goddess in the creation myths. In early representations, she occurs alone: after the separation of Heaven and Earth, Nüwa fashioned clay figurines of human beings that came to life.²¹

Her services as restorer of order to the world are equally important in the cycle of stories about her. According to the *Liezi* 列子, at the beginning there was no stability and the first people were struck by continuous disasters. But Nüwa repaired the broken sky with melted five-coloured stones and saved the human race from extinction.²²

¹⁹ A bodhisattva is an enlightened being that postpones the final achievement of buddhahood in order to alleviate other people’s sufferings and help them to reach enlightenment.

²⁰ Cf. Chün-Fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: the Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001.

²¹ Cf. *Tai ping yulan*, chapter 78, pp. 471-472, and chapter 360 p. 1693.

²² The *Liezi* is one of the most relevant Taoist texts. It was composed by the Taoist master Lie (“believed to have lived around 400 BC” Loewe, *Early Chinese Texts*, p. 299), and contains theoretical discussions and numerous mythological accounts. For the myth about Nüwa see Yang Bojun, ed., *Liezi jishi* 列子集釋 (Records of Master Lie), Beijing, Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1979, chapter 5, p. 150.

During the second century AD, the united form of Nüwa and her brother-husband Fuxi 伏羲 prevailed: as a pair, they are represented with human bodies and serpentine tails (fig. 6.8, b). However, in the watercolour, Nüwa has a completely human aspect and is sitting on a rock, holding a *ruyi* 如意 sceptre²³.

The last leaf of the album shows the image of Li Guai 李拐. This name can be read as an abbreviation of Li Tie 铁 Guai (Iron-crutch Li), who is one of the Eight Immortals. These figures, revered for their spiritual powers and worshipped as divine saints, are extremely important in Taoism. Almost all Taoist immortals were originally human beings who subsequently underwent a spiritual and physical transformation, resulting in an existence beyond the bounds of mortal life. As it can also be seen in other representations of Li Tie Guai, who lived during the Sui dynasty (581-618), he has the aspect of a crippled, deformed man with an iron crutch, although this was not his original aspect. It is said that one day, as his soul was about to go to Mount Hua, a sacred peak in Shaanxi, he told his disciple to watch over his body, adding that if he had not returned in seven days, the disciple was to cremate the body. On the sixth day the disciple's mother fell ill and he cremated the body, because he had to rush home. On the seventh day, Li's soul returned, to find his body gone. So, he had to possess the body of an old man who had just died nearby and was still warm.²⁴ Li Tie Guai became one of the most popular of all Taoist adepts and his worship is still very strong today.

Different structure and narrative content characterise the set Add. 320, which was purchased by the British Library in 1844, and then transferred to the British Museum together with Add. 319. This complete series of 24 leaves, measuring 40.5 x 51.5 cm, is registered in the British Museum's records with the title "Ten Kings of Hell", but in the old catalogue of the British Library it is listed as "Heaven and Hell. State of Future Rewards and Punishments". As a matter of fact, it is a description of how, after death, the souls are judged, depending on their deeds and behaviour during their earthly life. Meritorious souls are remunerated with a pleasant stay in a heavenly paradise, while waiting for their next reincarnation into another human being. Sinful

²³ A *ruyi* is an S-shaped ornamental object, usually made of jade, formerly a symbol of good luck.

²⁴ The story is contained in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) compendium *Complete Biographies of the Assorted Immortals* (Liexian quanzhuan 列仙全传) by Wang Shizhen; see the edition published by Hebei meishu chubanshe 河北美术出版社 (Shijiazhuang) in 1996, chapter 1, p. 197.

souls must stand before the judgement seat in one of the ten courts of the underworld, where they are condemned to an adequate punishment. Each court is presided over by a king, but there are different versions regarding the name of these rulers and the types of sins punished in each court. In the album, the ten kings, all with beards and moustaches, wear five-fold hats and regal attire, and are all portrayed in the same pose, sitting at a table, carefully listening to the accusations against the souls under trial, standing in front of them (fig. 6.9). They are also all framed by the same simple architecture of the courts, with a label bearing the king's name under the roof. The quality of execution of these watercolours is not as high as in the other sets, but the scenes – especially those of pitiless and bloody physical tortures – are rendered in a particular vivid way.

In the last leaf, the Wheel of Eternity is turning in the middle, and souls exit the underworld, reincarnated into human beings, animals or insects, according to their good or evil deeds in the previous life.

The most evident characteristic that emerges from the five sets described above is the eclecticism of Chinese folk religion: from ancient times, common people worshipped gods and spirits whom they considered powerful and capable of help in case of need, regardless of their religious affiliation. In order to make a distinction between the various deities, it was very important to visualise their images. This is the reason why, despite some variations, conventions for the representation of gods and legendary figures were necessary, and are scrupulously observed also in export watercolours. Some compositional rules are followed, as well. For instance, in all the album leaves, the deities are depicted in a frontal and central position, for this was the traditional method to stress their prominence. The frontal position also indicates stability and rectitude, and allows to express the fullness and integrity of the deity's essence. Among the conventions of these illustrations, colours, although far from being the only symbols, bear a great significance. They symbolise natural elements, cardinal points, as well as virtues and hierarchy. The purpose of colourful images and bright tones is to capture the attention of the viewer immediately, making the message of the painting easily understandable and more efficacious.

The richness of Chinese religious pantheons and the variety of cults were a fascinating mystery in the eyes of Western visitors. Thus, images of exotic deities were among the most representative documents of Chinese culture. Engravings of Taoist deities, based on Chinese paintings and woodcuts brought to Europe from

Beijing by Christian missionaries, were already presented in *China Illustrata*, an illustrated compendium of the western knowledge about China, compiled by the German Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kirchner in 1666. As proved by the specimens at the British Museum and those in other collections, there was a certain demand of export albums of deities in the 18th and 19th centuries, and such watercolours were considered remarkable for the treatment of colours and decorative motifs. On the other hand, these figures appeared as nothing more than fantastic creatures, fruit of imagination and superstition, and their intrinsic religious value and allegoric significance were underestimated and not fully understood. However, it is worth pointing out that the Canton artists – even if unconsciously – included in these illustrations the dynamism of Chinese systems of beliefs and a long history of religious and philosophical speculations.

Monastic life and temples

Another interesting aspect of Chinese religious sphere is the complex of daily practices that characterise the life of the clergy. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 24 is a rare example of an export album on this theme. In 24 leaves, each measuring 39.9 x 50.5 cm, the set illustrates – in a schematic but clear way – some of the most relevant activities and everyday occupations of Buddhist monks. The drawings are executed in black ink without colours. The outlines are well defined with regular, thin traits. The figures are placed on an empty background. Sometimes a few lines delimiting floors, walls and archways indicate indoor scenes, and a few elements, like tables, chairs and statues, are included in order to distinguish different spaces. On each leaf, a Chinese inscription vertically written on the right describes the depicted activity. Some drawings refer to simple daily occurrences, such as the one showing all the monks gathered in the dining-hall for the mid-day meal.

However, the most important tasks that the monks must accomplish every day for the enhancement of their awareness and the cultivation of spiritual virtues are those linked to the study of theological texts and the devotional chanting of sutras (fig. 6.10, a). These activities are carried out every day at fixed times, with a ritual regularity.

Besides usual practices, some specific ceremonies are also represented. For instance, a young priest is depicted having his head shaven by a senior monk, as part of his initiation rites, while in a funerary scene, tributes are paid to a dead monk, as his body being cremated. A typical and essential occupation for Buddhist monks is seeking alms, for they have to rely mostly on other people's donations for their own maintenance. Thus, in some leaves, monks are seen begging in the streets for food, or for funds to restore a temple or to buy incense.

Looking at the album leaves, it can be noticed that whatever the activity or practice, it is never performed individually, but always in groups. Furthermore, it also emerges that music is an essential aspect in the daily life of Buddhist monks.²⁵ As a matter of fact, many activities of the monastic community involve the use of instruments, according to the idea that monastic cultivation of spirituality and moral integrity can be achieved through the use of music, considered as an acceptable offering in the sutras. This principle is expressed in a drawing of monks gathered to pick tea leaves, while another one is playing a percussion instrument accompanying the movements of the group with a rhythmical, melodic sound (fig. 6.10, b). In such a scene, religious ideas and social reality are combined and transcended in another dimension of consciousness, in which musical concepts and experience are continually reformulated.

As monks spend most of their life within the monastic compound, it is also worth considering the peculiar structure and environment of the temple itself. There are no such descriptive export albums in the British Museum's collection, while the two sets Add. Or. (Additional Oriental) 2084-2106 and Add. Or. 2139-2162 held by the British Library are suitable for this purpose. One of them contains 23 watercolours - with another leaf missing - measuring 39 x 51 cm, and the other is made of a complete series of 24 leaves, measuring 42 x 53 cm. According to the library's records, they were both executed between 1800 and 1805, and were acquired in 1806. Furthermore, they both depict - with minor variations - the different parts of "Honam temple", situated in the Honam (corresponding to Henan 河南) district of Canton. This Buddhist temple was a favourite spot for excursion amongst the foreign merchants, as well as a popular subject in Chinese export painting. Views of the

²⁵ The importance of music in Chinese Buddhism is stressed by Pi-Yen Chen in his *Morning and Evening Service: the Practice of Ritual, Music, and Doctrine in the Chinese Buddhist Monastic Community*, Ann Arbor, UMI, 1999.

temple were also sketched by western artists visiting Canton, who had a tendency to emphasise the calm atmosphere of a place that seemed almost detached from the rest of the world, so much in contrast with the noisy and busy streets of the city (fig. 6.11).

The leaves of the set Add. Or. 2084-2106 are all inscribed with "Joss House, Honam", in the upper right corner. In both sets, some of the buildings are inscribed with their names in Chinese characters. The various illustrations and the birds-eye view of the whole complex clearly show the structure and architecture of the temple, consisting of small minor temples, pavilions, residential quarters for monks, as well as study rooms and stores for sacred Buddhist texts, all set in a walled enclosure.

These two albums are a detailed, reliable document of the main features of Chinese temples, which have not undergone substantial changes since ancient times. As it can be seen from the watercolours, the planning of a temple complex – be it Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian – is based on the axial planning concept of an imperial palace. The albums open the description of the temple with the representation of the entrance, giving to the viewer the impression that he is actually approaching the temple, and is going to enter and visit it (fig. 6.12). The wide flight of stairs that gives access to the complex is flanked by tea-shops and food stalls. This is the typical introductory image shown on the first leaf of export watercolour sets about Chinese temples. Such a scene is usually the most animated of the album, with busy vendors serving their customers, visitors entering and leaving the temple, and monks passing by. Particularly lively is a painting in oil on canvas depicting the street outside a temple (fig. 6.13): it is evident that the main purpose of the artist was to offer information about Chinese customs and activities. Against a backdrop of Chinese religious architecture, a variety of Chinese costumes are displayed, from those of the strolling gentry to those of the coolies awaiting the return of their master from the temple. A group drinking tea, or the paraphernalia of fans and birdcages are details of supposedly typical Chinese life, which were especially striking in the eyes of foreign visitors, and were inserted in the picture in order to satisfy the westerners' request of peculiar Chinese souvenirs.

The leaves illustrating the various areas inside the temple's enclosure present a completely different atmosphere. The attention is focused on describing the buildings and their functions, in a green environment of trees and plants, with very few people.

Thus, the impression is given of a quiet and pleasant setting, particularly suitable for meditation, prayer and study.

Similarly to other Chinese monuments, the temple's halls are depicted raised on a podium of stone or bricks. They are characterised by beam-frame structure and tilting or upturned roofs covered with glazed tiles. The red columns and the application of bright colours and ornaments to the bracketing system give emphasis to the elements of Chinese construction. In the halls are usually placed coloured or gilt statues of deities, as well as scrolls of landscape, bamboo and plum-blossoms paintings. The main prayer hall, called "Precious Hall of the Great Hero" (Daixiong baodian 大雄宝殿), is the focal point of the complex (fig. 6.14). Beyond the prayer halls, at the rear of the site, there are the monks' quarters, which include the store-rooms for sacred books, the refectory, places for cooking and washing-up, and gardens within the temple walls. A magnificent panorama could be viewed from a special building in the temple, called "Tower for Enjoying the Distant View" (na yuan lou 纳远楼).

At the end of his imaginary visit, the foreign viewer not only has learnt something about a type of religious architecture completely new to him, but can also indirectly perceive the mystic and contemplative atmosphere, distinctive of a Chinese temple.

Comparison with the religious subjects on Chinese export porcelain

The analysis of this group of watercolour albums raises some considerations about the choice of subjects to represent in Chinese export art. As a matter of fact, it is evident that the use of religious themes in export watercolours and on export porcelain presents significant differences.

More precisely, while watercolours only refer to Chinese religious traditions and beliefs, most of the religious motifs on porcelain represent Christian subjects (fig. 6.15). D. F. Lunsingh Scheurleer explains that "from the last quarter of the seventeenth century the export trade kept increasing, and the Chinese porcelain makers began to adapt their porcelain more and more to the taste of their European

customers".²⁶ The adaptation involved shapes – with the introduction, for instance, of plates and dishes with broad, flat rims – as well as decorations. The various East India companies brought to China samples, among which there were also famous biblical scenes, from both the Old and New Testaments. Chinese traditional designs continued to appear on a certain amount of export ware destined for Europe, but they lost the original symbolic meanings and were used in a purely decorative manner. This phenomenon also affected some motifs supplied by the three principal religions in China. Only occasionally Confucian figures, such as Confucius seated, bearded and dressed in official robes, are shown on export porcelain. On the other hand, Taoist Immortals, Buddhist deities, as well as symbols and legends connected with these doctrines, formed a relatively important source of inspiration for the decorators of porcelain, Laozi and Guanyin being the most frequently depicted personages. From mistakes and misinterpretations that can be detected on some pieces, it is evident that the copying of Christian subjects – and of other European subjects – was a difficult task for the Chinese porcelain painters, because they were forced to use models that were manifestations of a culture in all respects different from their own. However, the demand for ewers, bowls, sets of plates and cups bearing western designs could be explained by the fact that probably foreign customers preferred to contemplate subjects with which they felt more familiar, on objects destined to be used and displayed daily in their houses in Europe. Differently, following the didactic purpose of watercolour albums, their themes had to be distinctively Chinese. Nevertheless, the absence of Christian subjects in export watercolours does not mean that they were not represented by Chinese painters in different contexts. On the contrary, in the British Museum, under the registration number Add. 174-6, there are three 19th-century album leaves in ink and light colours on paper illustrating scenes from the Gospels (fig. 6.16). Each image is accompanied by a Chinese caption that briefly describes the depicted episode, and exactly indicates the Gospel, chapter and section to which the illustration refers. These paintings were not intended for export, but, in turn, had an informative, didactic purpose for the Chinese themselves. Craig Clunas points out that Christian imagery was already widely circulating in the Ming period, as the interest in the material culture of Christianity was independent of any religious commitment, mostly dictated by a general 'culture of curiosity' in the China

²⁶ See D. F. Lunsingh Scheurleer, *Chinese Export Porcelain*, London, Faber and Faber, 1974, p. 127.

of that time.²⁷ Furthermore, it goes without saying that the spreading of Christian icons and texts was assiduously promoted by the European missionaries, though their efforts to convert Chinese people to Christianity, always opposed by the local authorities, were not particularly successful.

The original figurative models were gradually modified by the Chinese artists. As can be seen in the British Museum's leaves, the result of this process of adaptation was a completely new form of Christian art, with figures, costumes, architecture and landscape bearing typically Chinese features. In time, Christian painting has continued to evolve, and modern pictures clearly show the conscious determination to express Christian subjects in Chinese terms and according to Chinese ideas, marking a step in the appearance of a truly indigenous Chinese Christian art.

²⁷ Cf. Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*, London, Reaktion Books, 1997, p. 173.

Illustrations



Figure 6. 1 Unknown Chinese artist. Taoist Deity of Water. Hanging scroll mounted as panel. Ink, colour and gold on silk. Southern Song, first half of the 12th century. 125.5 x 55.9 cm. One of a set of three. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 6. 2 Dragon King of the Sea. Watercolours on paper. 46 x 37 cm. One of a set of five. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 2. British Museum, London.



Figure 6. 3 Bronze *fangyi* vessel with decorations of dragons on the upper part of the body and on the foot. Anyang (14th-11th centuries BC). Height: 19.5 cm. Private collection.



Figure 6. 4 Pan'gu. Watercolours on paper. 35 x 26 cm. One of a set of nine. Ch. Ptg. 435. British Museum, London.



a



b

Figure 6.5 a) God of Wealth. Watercolours on paper. 35 x 36 cm. One of a set of nine. Ch. Ptg. 435. British Museum, London. b) God of Wealth. Colour print. Qing dynasty (1644-1911). 49 x 48 cm. Beijing.

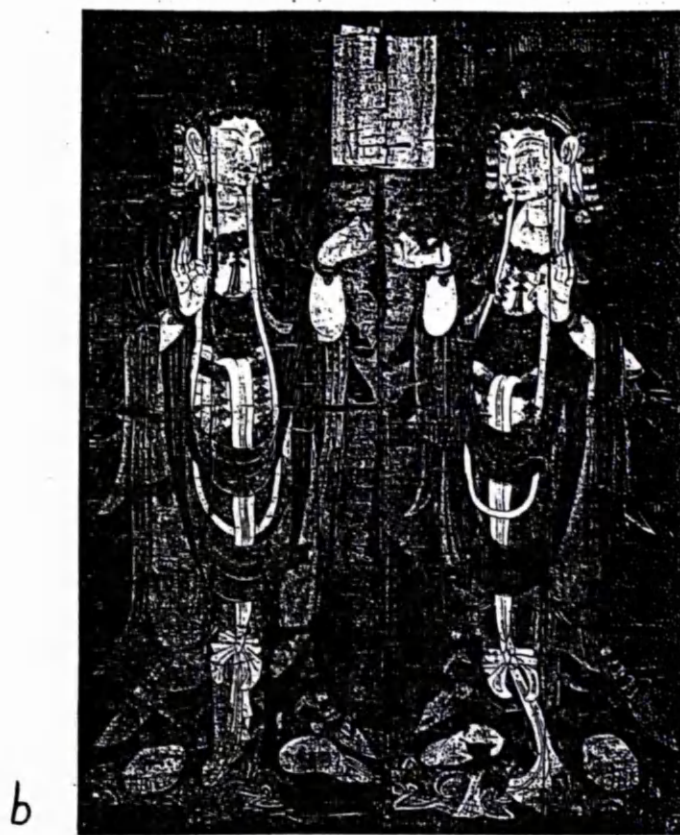


Figure 6. 6 a) Guanyin. Watercolours on paper. 42.8 x 28.2 cm. One of a set of 24. Add. 318. British Museum, London. b) Two facing Avalokitesvaras. Ink and colours on silk. From Cave 17, Dunhuang. Tang dynasty, mid-9th century. 147.3 x 105.3 cm. British Museum, London.



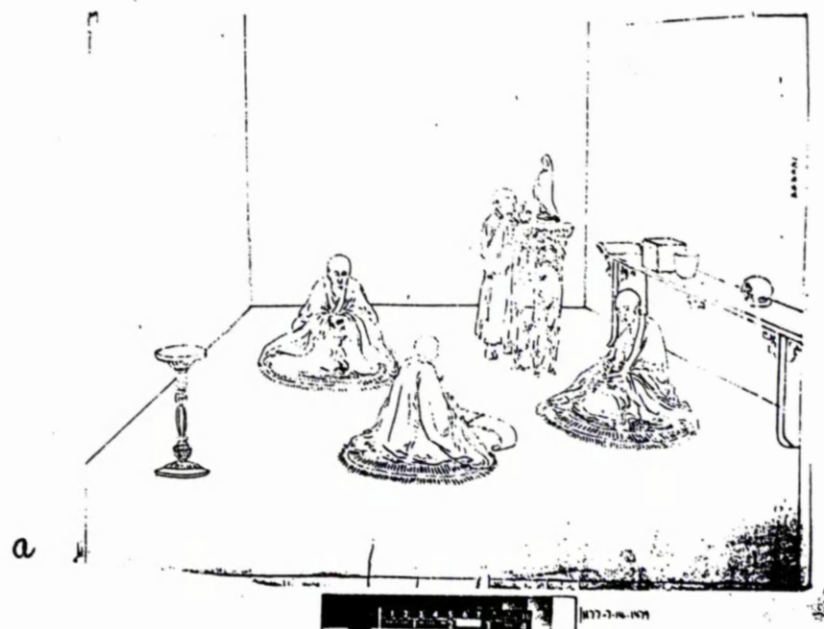
Figure 6. 7 Guanyin. Watercolours on paper. 40.7 x 31 cm. One of a set of 37. Add. 319. British Museum, London.



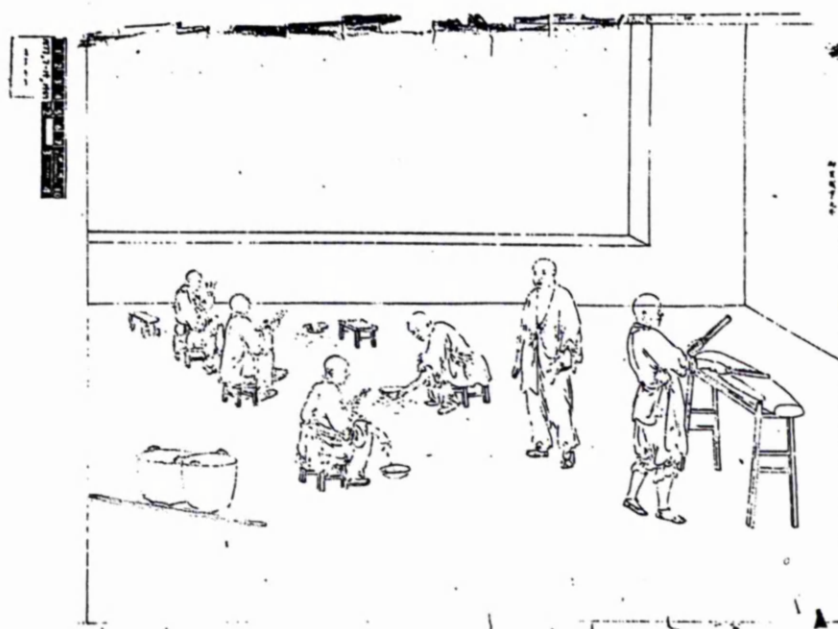
Figure 6. 8 a) Nüwa. Watercolours on paper. 34.3 x 34 cm. One of a set of 37. Add. 319. British Museum, London. **b) Fuxi and Nüwa.** Rubbing of pottery tomb relief unearthed in 1951 from Chongqing County. Eastern Han (25-220). 39.5 x 48 cm. Sichuan Provincial Museum.



Figure 6. 9 Court of the King of Hell Wu Guan. Watercolours on paper. 40.5 x 51.5 cm. One of a set of 24. Add.320. British Museum, London.



a



b

Figure 6. 10 Scenes of monastic life. a) Chanting sutras. b) Monks picking tea leaves. Ink on paper. 39.5 x 50.5 cm. Two of a set of 24. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 24. British Museum, London.

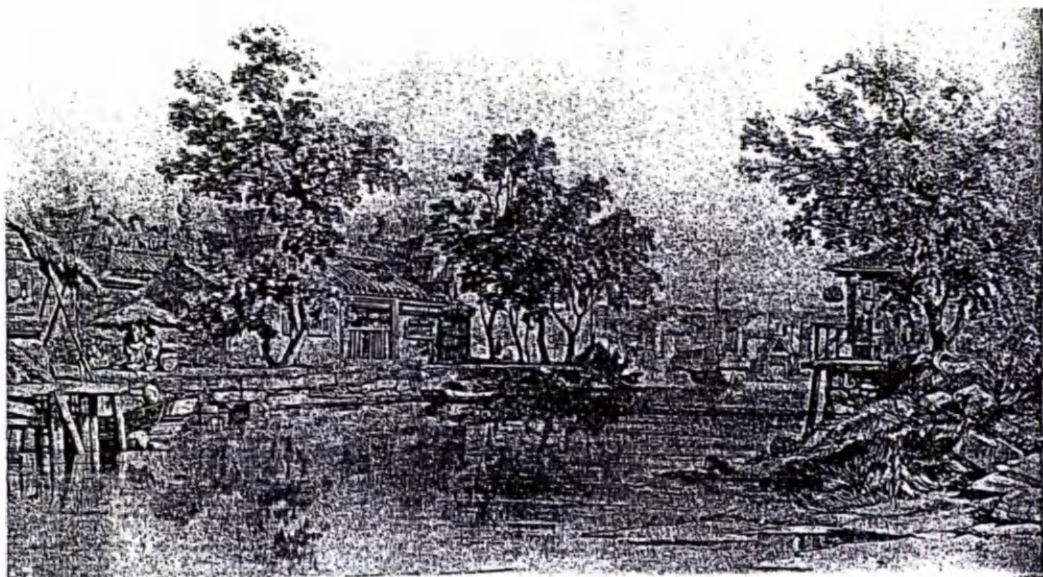


Figure 6. 11 Auguste Borget. Temple and Canal at Honam. Pencil drawing reproduced in Auguste Borget, *Sketches of China and the Chinese*, London, Tilt & Bogue, 1842.

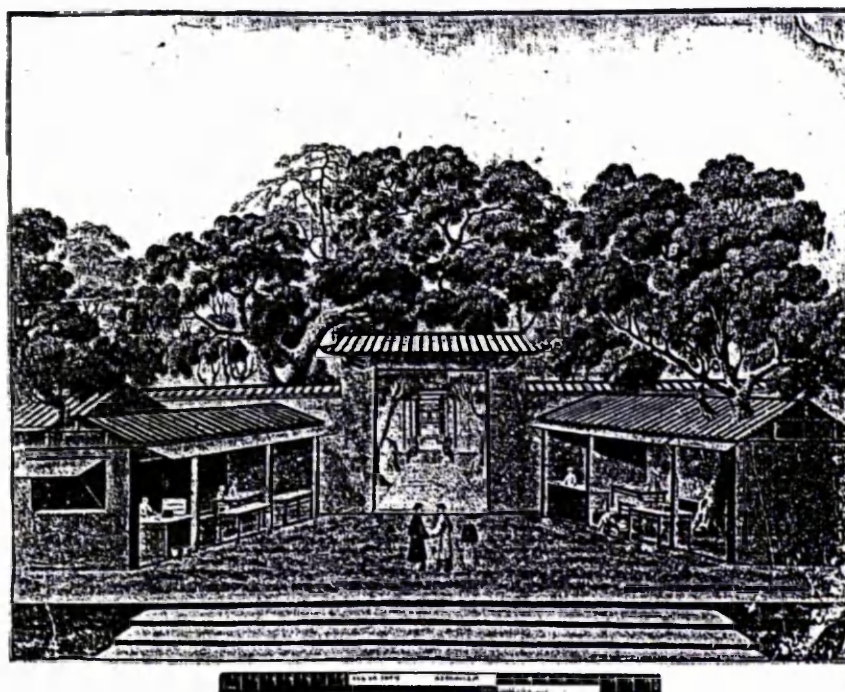
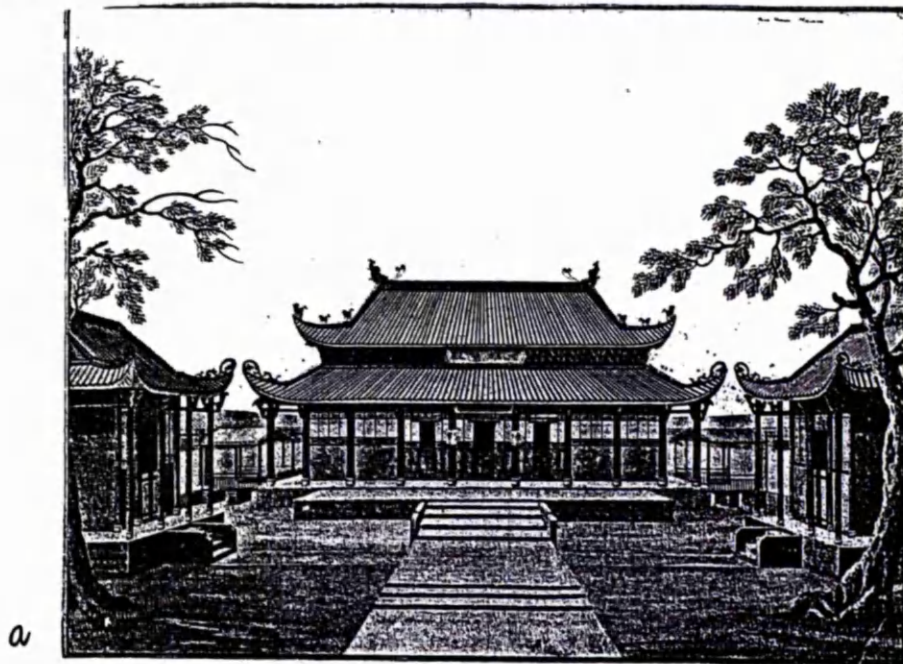


Figure 6. 12 Temple at Honam: entrance. Watercolours on paper. 39 x 51 cm. One of a set of 23. Add. Or. 2084. British Library, London.



Figure 6. 13 Street outside a temple. Oil on canvas. 40.7 x 55.9 cm. Collection of HSBC.



a



b

Figure 6. 14 a) 'Precious Hall of the Great Hero'. Watercolours on paper. 39 x 51 cm. One of a set of 23. Add. Or. 2086. British Library, London. b) 'Precious Hall of the Great Hero'. Tongjiao Temple (Tongjiao si 通教寺), Beijing. Ming dynasty (1368-1644).



Figure 6. 15 Saucer with painting of Crucifixion. Blue-and-white porcelain. Kangxi period (1661-1722). Diameter: 12.4 cm. Centraal Museum, Utrecht.



Figure 6. 16 Parable of the Good Samaritan (Gospel according to Luke, 10:29-37). Ink and colours on paper. 21.7 x 23.2 cm. One of a set of three. Add. 174. British Museum, London.

CHAPTER 7

CEREMONIES AND FESTIVALS

Archaeological records amply represent the strict organization of social activities in ancient China from the earliest times. The countless ritual bronze vessels unearthed all over the country give evidence of private and public ceremonies held according to scrupulously fixed ritual prescriptions, already during the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties, approximately between the 22nd and the third centuries BC. Furthermore, the iconography of Eastern Han tombs and shrines already reveals the existence of a ritual calendar, that is, the seasonal festivities and ceremonies that kept pace with the movement of the year through the seasons, as well as with the movement of an individual's life. Ancestral cults, periodical changes in the agricultural cycle, major rites of transition, such as the presentation of a bride to her husband's ancestors, and minor rites, such as the departure of an officer on a political or diplomatic mission, were all special occasions requiring appropriate celebrations.¹

Ceremonies and festivals certainly underwent a natural process of evolution and transformation throughout many centuries, yet retained those characteristics that appeared so strikingly peculiar to the western observers of the 18th and 19th centuries. Since initially they had very few opportunities to approach everyday life and customs of the Chinese community, the symbolic meaning of many celebrations and of the series of particular events and activities accompanying them remained obscure to the foreigners. However, as they were part the colourful and rich Chinese folklore, it was worthwhile to have them documented by reproducing scenes of the main festivals and ceremonies in export watercolours.

This subject matter is almost entirely neglected in publications concerning Chinese export painting. Only Craig Clunas, in his work about the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection of Chinese export watercolours, briefly mentions this theme while discussing a watercolour set produced at Ningbo in the 1850s.² Moreover, just

¹ Patricia Ann Berger presents her study of rites – especially those connected with ancestor worship – during the Eastern Han dynasty, through the analysis of the iconography in the ritual art of that time in Shandong and Jiangsu provinces, in her doctoral dissertation *Rites and Festivities in the Art of Eastern Han China: Shantung and Kiangsu Provinces*, Ann Arbor, UMI, 1980.

² Cf. Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984, p. 60.

a few specimens of albums illustrating festivals and ceremonies can be found in the catalogues of oriental art auctioneers.

The British Museum holds eight of such sets variously describing marriage and funeral ceremonies, processions and festivities.

Because of the lack of specific literature, the most direct and pertinent materials for reference and comparison are some accounts on Chinese customs and festivals published at the end of the 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century, when the European curiosity about the 'mysteries' of the Far East was still demanding to be satisfied. As a matter of fact, that was not only the period of numerous expeditions to the archaeological sites of the ancient Silk Road in the Chinese western regions,³ but also the time of intense anthropological and ethnographic studies by those researchers who were finally allowed to stay in China and travel inland with relative freedom.

It can be easily observed that even if some social phenomena, such as amusements, ceremonies and fêtes, may appear to be similar in many countries, their precise manifestations depend largely on the conceptions of the people under examination. Hence, as the manner in which a community celebrates particular occurrences is determined by its moral, philosophical, religious, political and social views, the analysis of the watercolours depicting scenes of Chinese celebrations helps to unveil some specific traits of the character of Chinese society.

Ceremonies and processions

The traditional celebration of a wedding is the main theme of two albums about ceremonies and processions.

Ch. Ptg. 408, donated to the British Museum by Miss Reeves in 1877, is a product of the first quarter of the 19th century. It contains 16 leaves, each measuring 39 x 48.6 cm, with carefully traced ink drawings. Add. 209 is an album of 12 leaves presented by A. W. Franks to the museum in 1896. The dimensions of the sheets – 36.8 x 46.4

³ Among the most important explorations to be mentioned there are the Swedish expeditions conducted by Sven Anders Hedin (1865-1952), the German expeditions led by Albert von le Coq (1860-1930), the British expeditions under the direction of Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862-1943), and the French expeditions guided by Paul Pelliot (1878-1945).

cm – are not much smaller than those of Ch. Ptg. 408, but it is noticeable that the technique of execution has undergone a change towards simplification, in line with the general tendency of export watercolour albums towards a decline, at its worst by the end of the 19th century. The most evident characteristics of this process, namely diminution of scale, reduction of size, increasingly crude colours and perfunctory drawings, are still not particularly accentuated, thus making assume that the album was produced around the middle of the century. By putting side by side in a sequence all the relevant images contained in both albums, it is possible to reconstruct the principal phases of a typical wedding day, as it is described, for example, in the chapter about marriage in *Everyday Customs in China*, a book first published in 1922 by Annie Cormack, as a result of her studies about Chinese life and traditions, carried out during the years spent in Beijing.⁴

The leaf with the inscription “yingqin meiren”迎親媒人 in the album Add. 209 can be considered as the first of the series. The caption, which is made of very specific terms, literally explains that the matchmaker is being conveyed to the bride’s house on a sedan-chair in order to escort her back to the bridegroom’s house for the wedding. Therefore, this watercolour not only gives evidence of the fact that in the past in China marriages were usually arranged by the parents, often with the help of a mediator, but also illustrates an important element of the procession from the bridegroom’s house to the bride’s house on the morning of the wedding day. As Annie Cormack explains, after some propitious rituals, the red bridal sedan-chair, decked in fine embroideries, is sent to collect the bride, accompanied by at least two middlemen and an attendant married woman who takes with her the bridal robe.

A leaf in the album Ch. Ptg. 408 depicts the next major phase, for the English caption describes the scene as “Bride on her chair” (fig. 7.1). Thus, at this point, the bridal chair, carried by four bearers is returning to the bridegroom’s house. The procession is headed by bearers of wedding lanterns, while it can be assumed from various accounts and other illustrations that other sedan-chairs, musicians, drums and gongs are following behind. Other leaves in the same album show that bearers carrying the dowry, as well as wedding pastry and wedding symbols, such as the mandarin duck, emblem of conjugal fidelity, were also part of the procession.

⁴ Cf. Annie Cormack, *Everyday Customs in China*, Edinburgh and London, The Moray Press, 1935 (fourth edition), pp. 49-62.

The crucial moment of the day, which is the ceremony of the couple's first meal, is represented on another leaf belonging to Ch. Ptg. 408. After completing the ritual of exchanging their wine cups and taking a sip from them, the bride and the bridegroom are served some dumplings taken from the bride's home, so that the first meal is eaten in harmony and agreement.

Both albums contain a scene of the final phase, technically called "bai tang" 拜堂, referring to the bows performed by the couple before the bridegroom's parents, as a sign of respect and submission (fig. 7.2, a). Finally – as Annie Cormack writes – when all the rituals have been accomplished, the newly-weds go out to the middle room and receive the greetings of the guests.

Such an event as a wedding was traditionally dense of meanings: the union of a young couple brought hopes for new life and continuation of a lineage; for the bride, it indicated the time when she had to leave her own family to enter her husband's family and to accomplish her duties as obedient wife and subservient daughter-in-law; for the two families who had arranged the marriage, it officially ratified an agreement of mutual exchange of goods, money and favours of various nature. All the details of the celebration were of great significance to the Chinese, but probably could not be understood by the foreigners. For this reason, they were considered not essential for the purposes of export art, and were usually omitted in export drawings and watercolours, which only presented the main elements in a schematic, simplified way. This characteristic clearly emerges by comparing the album leaves discussed above and a series of five views of a wedding procession held by the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 7.3). The attention given to the depiction of all the small particulars, like the names of both families on the lanterns borne in the front, the identifiable insignia on the chests of the military officers carrying the bridal chair, the official robe of the President of the Board of War who is heading the procession, the pillows and quilts forming part of the dowry, is in striking contrast with the unadorned scenes of the export sets, and leads Clunas to the conclusion that the set of five watercolours was originally a product of popular art addressed to a Chinese audience, "which happened to get exported at an early stage".⁵

Following the deep-rooted tradition of devotion towards the ancestors – the core of Confucian teachings and practices – funeral ceremonies have always been regarded

⁵ See Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984, p. 60.

with a special attention in Chinese society. Hence, together with the wedding celebrations, they are the most represented ceremonies in export watercolours. Two of the British Museum's albums are entirely dedicated to this subject. Ch. Ptg. 409 is the companion of Ch. Ptg. 408; it presents the same characteristics in the technique of execution, though the 18 sheets are slightly bigger, each measuring 40.3 x 48.8 cm. Add. 326, transferred from the British Library in 1962, was purchased in 1844 with other albums already discussed in previous chapters, such as Add. 319, Add. 320 and Add. 323, and it is likely to have been executed by the same workshop, as it bears the same features, as far as drawing technique and application of colours are concerned. The 12 sheets measure 38 x 51 cm, and the images consist of coloured figures against a completely white, plain background. Each illustration of both albums is numbered and briefly described by the usual Cantonese inscription centred at the bottom of the leaf. The content of the two sets is very similar, comparable again with Annie Cormack's account.⁶ They start with the scene of a seriously ill man lying in bed, while his wife is sitting next to him. As soon as death takes place, the funeral preparations begin: the next image shows the relatives going to buy the water to bathe the corpse, because, as Annie Cormack explains, it is prescribed not to use water that is in the house for this ritual. Washed and clothed, the body is put on the bed, and completely covered with a piece of silk or cotton and a sheet of paper for the face, so that the relations and friends can pay their respects to the deceased. When the coffin is prepared with a lining of silk and a pillow stuffed with straw or cotton wool, the corpse is laid in, while all around the relatives weep and wail, and some musicians play various instruments. As it can be seen in the fourth leaf of Ch. Ptg. 409, the body is packed firmly into the coffin, and the sheet of paper is turned down in order to leave the face uncovered (fig. 7.4). The fourth leaf of Add. 326 bears a different image representing the practice of presenting food to the dead. This offering goes on for at least the first year after the death, during which, every day the family places food before the tablet of the deceased in the middle room of the house by the side of the household gods.

The next stage illustrated in the albums is the funeral itself: the coffin is transferred into a catafalque, in which it is carried to the place of burial. A sedan-chair with an image of the deceased is carried in front of the catafalque, while behind, relatives,

⁶ Cf. Annie Cormack, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-127.

friends, bearers of banners and lanterns, and musicians follow in procession. In the end, the coffin is put into the grave, which has been dug in the position arranged by a sorcerer and is covered with earth in the presence of the weeping mourners. The last two leaves of Ch. Ptg. 409 briefly represent the mourning rituals observed periodically for a long time after the funeral, mostly involving prayers before the tablet of the deceased and the ancestral images, and burning of paper money and paper clothing to satisfy the needs of the soul in the other world.

Finally, it is worth paying attention to the ninth illustration of Add. 326, which depicts three men around a table meticulously calculating the funeral expenses (fig. 7.5). The meaning of this scene can be fully understood only in the light of Chinese beliefs and traditions concerning the death of a relative. As a matter of fact, especially in the past, it was very important to spend as much money and time as possible in the proper carrying out of all the mourning ceremonies with the double purpose of honouring the dead and protecting the family, since it was believed that the spirits could return to do harm to those who had not observed the proper rites.

An image almost identical to this is contained in the album Add. 208, but as it is completely isolated from any context, it would be difficult to interpret the scene in relation to the theme of funeral ceremonies without the evidence provided by Add. 326. The 12 leaves of Add. 208, presented to the British Museum by Franks, have almost the same dimensions – 35.4 x 46.4 cm – and the same features as Add. 209. The bright coloured illustrations depict miscellaneous scenes of celebrations with no connection among each other, and arranged without a sequential order. Therefore, the circumstances of every specific event are not always identifiable. Most of the images seem to refer to religious ceremonies, agricultural rites and official processions. Various representations of this kind can also be found in the two albums containing scenes of marriage ceremonies. In Add. 209, for instance, there are four leaves dedicated to the occurrence of local examinations. They represent: the students preparing for the exams; the chief examiner carried on a sedan-chair to the place where the examinations are going to be taken (fig. 7.2, b); the ceremony for the announcement of the successful candidates; a feast of celebration following the announcement. The reason why so great emphasis is laid on the events of examinations even in export watercolours lies in the fact that an efficient system of periodically held public examinations at different levels was the principal method for the recruitment of government officials. Exams of low levels took place in local

seats, while those for the most important positions took place in the capital. A series of very difficult written tests aimed at assessing the knowledge and the skills of the candidates, in order to choose among them the most suitable for a certain position. The selection was based on strict criteria of evaluation and usually even in the local examinations at the lowest level less than ten percent of the candidates were successful.⁷ The lucky ones had good reasons to celebrate, as by passing the exam they distinguished themselves and could hope for a prestigious bureaucratic career. Some general illustrations of processions with officials, accompanied by bearers of banners and lanterns at the front to clear the way, soldiers bearing halberds, and musicians playing various instruments are included in the album Ch. Ptg. 408. These representations of parades are, however distantly, descended from the several extant depictions of imperial processions of the Ming and Qing periods, though in export albums the illustrations appear on separate sheets, rather than on one continuous, long handscroll. Just to mention an example, two Ming dynasty handscrolls probably represent the procession escorting emperor Shizong 世宗 (reigned 1522-1566) on his trip to visit the imperial tombs at Anlu, in Hubei, and the journey back to the imperial palace in Beijing (fig. 7.6).⁸ Both paintings are done in great detail, finely combining the impressive display of men, equipment, carriages, barges, standards and riders with a delicate scenery of hills and rivers. The depiction of paraphernalia, weapons, musical instruments, vehicles and costumes is very accurate and corresponding to the fashion and use of the time, making of these handscrolls a historical document that has attracted the attention of the experts.

Festivals

Among the scenes contained in the album Add. 208, already discussed above, there are some representing a few of the numerous seasonal festivities, which, distributed

⁷ For a brief discussion of the imperial examination system (keju zhidu 科举制度) see "Gli esami statali e il reclutamento dei funzionari", in Mario Sabattini and Paolo Santangelo, *Storia della Cina*, Bari, Editori Laterza, 1994, pp. 414-417.

⁸ Na Zhiliang, Curator of the Department of Calligraphy and Painting at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, in 1969, gives a description and a tentative interpretation of the two handscrolls in his *The Emperor's Procession*, Taipei, The National Palace Museum, 1969.

throughout the lunar year,⁹ are characterised by countless local variations and nowadays still exert a noticeable influence on the rhythm of everyday life. In particular, on one of the leaves the inscription *wu long* 舞龙 - literally meaning "perform a dragon's dance" - describes the image of seven coolies parading the effigy of a dragon through the streets. They act as living vertebrae under a cloth or paper skin painted to look like scales, undulating in life-like fashion. A description of such a procession is given by Bredon and Mitrophanow: at the passage of the monster "gongs clang, crackers pop, and bonfires of paper money blaze, while people sprinkle him with water".¹⁰ This minor festival is held in honour of the Dragon King of Water, in order to ask him for rain. Usually the rain processions occur in the fifth lunar month - roughly corresponding to June - when the soil of the fields is cracked with the dry heat, and are repeated to celebrate and thank the god, as soon as the rain arrives.

Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 10, only composed of seven loose leaves, also contains four scenes of festivities, besides three genre scenes representing a domestic sacrifice, an open-air meal and some people catching butterflies on a riverside. The watercolour set is of relatively small size, each sheet measuring 28.8 x 30.3 cm, and it was part of Miss Reeves' donation. The four images of public celebrations refer to some of the most important occurrences of the year, namely New Year's Day, the Lantern Festival and the Dragon Boat Festival.

According to the phases of the moon, the Chinese New Year falls on a variable date between late January and late February, on the day of the second new moon after the winter solstice, and it symbolises the renewal of the house, of the familiar and friendship bounds, of the assistance received by ancestral spirits and tutelary gods, of the hopes for a bumper harvest, good profits, happiness and prosperity. This period of jubilation and celebration lasts for the first 15 days of the first lunar month. As it can be seen from the watercolour, in the morning of the first day and on the succeeding days, men go out early to call on their friends and relatives, and give them the New Year greetings. A few men are depicted 'kowtowing' - that is the Chinese custom of prostrating touching the ground with the head - in front of the

⁹ Since early times Chinese people have been using the lunar calendar, which is likely to have been already calculated and fixed during the Zhou dynasty. In the earliest pages of the *Shujing* there is some evidence of an early calendar kept in line with the sun and the moon: consult, for example, the Chinese edition published in 1979 (Taipei, Zhonghua shuju 中华书局).

¹⁰ Cf. Juliet Bredon and Igor Mitrophanow, *The Moon Year*, New York, Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1966, p. 341.

house, in order to show devotion and submission to the god of the hearth. In the meantime, women stay on the doorstep, because they are not supposed to leave their homes for the first five days of the year.

The feasting time is closed on the 15th day of the first lunar month with the Lantern Festival, which is represented on two leaves of Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 10. The lantern is a symbol of light, male and positive element and, as already apparent in the previous albums, no social or religious celebration is complete without colourful lanterns in symbolic shapes and bearing auspicious inscriptions. Thus, it is not surprising that everybody – even the humblest people – makes an effort to have their own lanterns lit on the night of the first full moon of the year. On this occasion, processions of spectacular, variously shaped and decorated lanterns parade through the streets, or, as shown on the leaf numbered 1397, on the rivers, while people look at them astonished. It is also a sign of prestige for a family to display the most numerous, as well as the most original and artistically sophisticated lanterns: on the leaf 1396, a proud host shows the fanciful and elaborate lanterns hanging in front of his house to his guests, who have come to admire them (fig. 7.7).

The last festivity represented in the set is the Dragon Boat Festival, celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. There are different versions about the origin of this festival, and Annie Cormack notices that it “is more generally observed in Central and South China than in North China”,¹¹ probably because it is mostly considered as connected to a semi-legendary event reported to have taken place in the ancient State of Chu, in the area of today’s Hunan and Hubei.¹² It is handed down from generation to generation that during the period of the Warring States (453-222 BC), Qu Yuan, an honest and upright minister of the State of Chu, lost the favour of the king, because of the influence of corrupted sycophants. After being banished, he drowned himself into a river, exactly on the morning of the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. Since his body was never recovered, people crowded on the river and wept for admiration of his sacrifice. They also threw rice upon the waters to feed his ghost, and wrapped the food in pieces of silk, so that the dragon inhabiting the river could not eat the offerings. Hence, it is generally believed that the dragon boat contest

¹¹ See Annie Cormack, op. cit., p. 158.

¹² The significance and the features of the Dragon Boat Festival are discussed in detail by Göran Aijmer in his *The Dragon Boat Festival on the Hupeh-Hunan Plain, Central China*, Stockholm, The Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, 1964.

originated from the activities to cherish the memory of Qu Yuan.¹³ However, as Göran Aijmer points out, it is feasible to assume a relationship between the Dragon Boat Festival and the transplanting of the rice plants, which is usually done around the fifth lunar month. In a society where the cultivation of rice is an essential factor of the economic life, this festival may originally have been a symbolic landmark indicating the end of an important phase in the production cycle, and the beginning of the summer rain, which was necessary to the growth of the plants and, consequently, to a fruitful harvesting season.¹⁴

The watercolour of Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 10 – almost identical to the representations in the albums Add. 204 and Ch. Ptg. 410 – shows the principal attraction of the festival: a boat race (fig. 7.8). The spectators are depicted watching the contest from the bank, while the boats are competing in the river. The long boats are equipped with dragon head and tail, carry the figurine of their own protecting deity, and are manned by more than 20 rowers each. The crews are complemented by other men with specific functions. The man standing in the bow guides the boat with flag signals. The man standing in the stern manages a steering oar. The drummer and the man playing clapper boards give the rhythm for the paddles. Some other men standing in the boat try to condition the direction of the wind with the help of fans. Schematic as it is, the representation gives a clear idea of the atmosphere of the occasion and the performance of the competition. The only detail that cannot be inferred from this scene is the fact that sometimes the race became a real naval battle, and, in the past, the fatal accidents that occurred had caused the authorities to impose a temporary ban on the ceremony.¹⁵

Festivals are the sole theme of the albums Add. 204 and Ch. Ptg. 410, two sets of 12 leaves each representing the main celebrations of the 12 lunar months. The sheets are of a slightly different size, measuring 36.8 x 48 cm and 40.8 x 48.7 cm respectively, but the two series contain similar images, all drawn in black ink. However, the different treatment of trees, buildings and figures shows that they were not produced by the same hand. More precisely, on the basis of a number of affinities, such as the quality of the paper, the size of the sheets, the layout and style of the images, the

¹³ The story of Qu Yuan and its connection with the Dragon Boat Festival can be found in ancient sources, such as the Qing dynasty encyclopaedia *Gujin tushu jicheng* 古今圖書集成, compiled by Chen Menglei and Jiang Tingxi (*Sui gong* 皇朝詩經 - “Merits of the Year” – section, volume 51, page 3a).

¹⁴ Cf. Göran Aijmer, op. cit., pp. 21-27.

¹⁵ Such circumstances are reported, for example, in the *Gujin tushu jicheng*, see note 13.

position of the Cantonese caption at the bottom of the leaf, it is very likely that Ch. Ptg. 410 came from the same workshop where Ch. Ptg. 408 and Ch. Ptg. 409 were also executed. What makes Add. 204 particularly important is the fact that this is a rare example of an album bearing the workshop's label. As a matter of fact, on the second white sheet at the beginning of the album there is the red seal of Sunqua (active: 1830-1870), who, with his assistants, was specialised in oil painting – mostly in western style – and export watercolours.¹⁶

Both the albums start the series of festivities with the Lantern Festival. Probably, this is considered the most representative event of the first lunar month because, by closing the holiday period, it indicates the restarting of all the usual activities and the beginning of a new productive year.

The next major festival represented in the albums is “Qing Ming Jie” 清明节, celebrated on the fifth day of the fourth month, or rather 102 days after the winter solstice, as this is the one solar festival. Literally meaning “The Clear and Bright Festival”, this was originally a spring festival of renewal of life. The most famous representation of the Qing Ming Festival is a long scroll painting by Zhang Zeduan (early – middle 11th century). With the main purpose of showing the dynamism, vitality and prosperity of the Northern Song capital Kaifeng, called Bianjing at that time, it describes the great animation in the streets, on the day of this festivity, with a crowd of busy sellers and artisans, servants carrying their masters' sedan-chairs, coolies bearing heavy loads, and passers-by walking hastily (fig. 7.9).¹⁷ However, the two album scenes depicting people praying on their relatives' tombs emphasise the principal ceremony of the day, namely the visit to the family graves, or “bai shan” 拜山, “pay the ritual visit at the hill”,¹⁸ as it is written on the leaf of Ch. Ptg. 410. According to Bredon and Mitrophanow, the connection between the dead and the period of the year's re-birth can be explained by the fact that by sweeping the ancestors' graves and offering them food and paper money, the descendants not only

¹⁶ C. Crossman presents the production of Sunqua and his workshop in his *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, Woodbridge, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1991, pp. 124-132.

¹⁷ Zhang Zeduan's “Riverside Scene at the Qing Ming Festival” (Qing Ming shanghe tu 清明上河图) is described and commented in Zhang Anzhi, “Riverside Scene at the Qing Ming Festival” by the Song artist Zhang Zeduan (Song Zhang Zeduan Qing Ming shanghe tu 宋张择端清明上河图), Beijing, Renmin meishu chubanshe 人民美术出版社, 1979. See also R. Whitfield, *Chang Tse-tuan's Ch'ing-ming shang he t'u*, Ph. D. diss., Princeton Univ., 1965; and R. Whitfield, “The Material World of Zhang Zeduan” in *Bright as Silver, White as Snow*, Hong Kong: Yungming tang, 1998.

¹⁸ In this context, “shan” 山 (hill) means “grave”, for the traditional Chinese graves are in the shape of mounds or hills.

accomplish a fundamental duty of the ancestral cult, and renew their right of property on the family graveyard, but also propitiate the spirits and obtain their favour for the first fruits of the year, at the time when the work in the fields begins.

The Mid-autumn Festival, represented on the eighth leaf of the two albums under discussion, is celebrated on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month, and is the second most important traditional festival next to the Qing Ming Festival. The name of this festivity derives from the fact that the eighth lunar month is the second of the three autumn months in the Chinese ancient calendar. This day is also dedicated to the worship of the Moon – symbol of the *yin*, female principle, darkness and cold – juxtaposed to the worship of the Sun in spring. Yet, as the images in the albums demonstrate, it is most of all a harvest festival. As a matter of fact, at this time of the year, the rains and the heat of the summer are over, the heavy labours of the fields have been completed, and after harvesting the granaries are full: all good reasons for the peasants to celebrate and enjoy themselves. The almost identical scenes of Add. 204 and Ch. Ptg. 410 depict a gathering in a rural village (fig. 7.10): the delighted audience is entertained with dances, music, theatrical performances and firecrackers. The full moon in the background indicates that, according to the tradition, the celebrations for this festival take place on the occasion of the mid-autumn full moon. The agricultural meaning of the festivity is stressed by the presence of an altar dedicated to the God of the Land and the God of Grain, “She Ji Zhi Shen” 社稷之神. Following the eclecticism of Chinese popular religion, already discussed in the previous chapter, it is not surprising that some of the annual festivals originated from Buddhist cults, often adapted according to Chinese customs and perception. It is the case of a celebration held on the 15th day of the sixth lunar month commemorating Guanyin’s vow to renounce Nirvāna’s¹⁹ final peace in order to help human beings to obtain Buddhahood. Despite the ambiguous nature of this deity, the image of Guanyin as a goddess prevails in popular belief. Even regarded as the idealisation of womanhood and the patron deity of women, she is a favourite object of women’s veneration. The worship of Guanyin is the subject of the ink drawings for the festival of the sixth lunar month: in a big hall a group of women, wearing ceremonial costumes and holding fans, performs a ritual dance, while an orchestra accompanies the rhythmical movements.

¹⁹ Nirvāna is the final goal of Buddhism, a transcendent state in which there is neither suffering, desire, nor sense of self, all illusions of the earthly world.

Other special occurrences during the year are connected with particular legends that have gained a deep significance on Chinese folklore. For instance, the festival chosen as representative for the seventh lunar month in both albums originating from the ancient story of the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid, of which there are different versions. Just to summarise the main points, the legend tells the love of a cowherd and a fairy maiden who was not only a beautiful and virtuous girl, but also a clever and skilful weaver. The couple got married, had two children, and led a happy life. However, one day the Weaving Maid was forced to go back to heaven and was allowed to be reunited to her husband only on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month every year. The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid are traditionally associated to Altair and Vega, two stars of the Milky Way that appear to be particularly bright between the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. In Add. 204 and Ch. Ptg. 410, the scene of the festivity in honour of the Cowherd and the Weaving Maid represents some women kneeling and praying before an altar, and is described as "Ceremony of Supplicating for Deftness" (Qi qiao hui 乞巧會). As a matter of fact, the festival on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month not only is the celebration of the reunion of the two lovers, but is also the occasion for women to ask the Weaving Maid for wit and deftness.

Completely different is the nature of the festivity that occurs on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. Although some scholars suggest that this annual event is connected with the ancient practice of climbing to the top of the hills with provisions to escape plagues in the valleys, and with the original military use of kites for giving distant signals from the hills,²⁰ the festival has gradually become just an occasion for some amusement in the open air in a particularly pleasant season. As shown on the album leaves, on this special day crowds gather on the hills to contemplate the view, have a picnic, and enjoy themselves with kite-flying.

No specific celebration or ceremony is described for the 12th lunar month. Both the albums close with the image of a busy street of shops crowded with coolies and people rushing to buy all what is necessary for the New Year's celebrations. This kind of 'ritual shopping' includes different articles, such as artificial flowers for decorations, gods' images, firecrackers, all sorts of food and gifts for friends and

²⁰ This hypothesis is held by Wolfram Eberhard, as well as by Juliet Bredon and Igor Mitrophanow. See: Eberhard, *Chinese Festivals*, New York, Henry Schuman, Inc., 1952, p. 111; Bredon and Mitrophanow, op. cit., pp. 427-430.

relatives, and is regarded as an essential part of the preparations for the most important festival of the year.

The choice of such a scene is very telling: the last leaf marks the end, and, at the same time, the beginning of a never-ending cycle, in which Chinese traditions are continuously perpetuated and renewed.

Illustrations

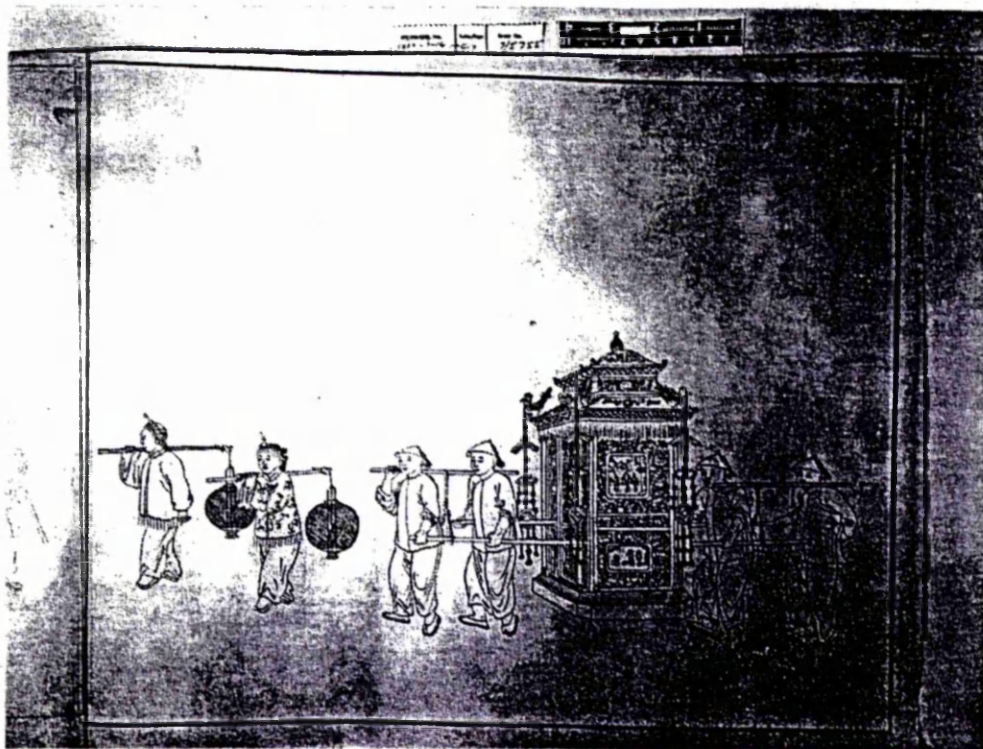
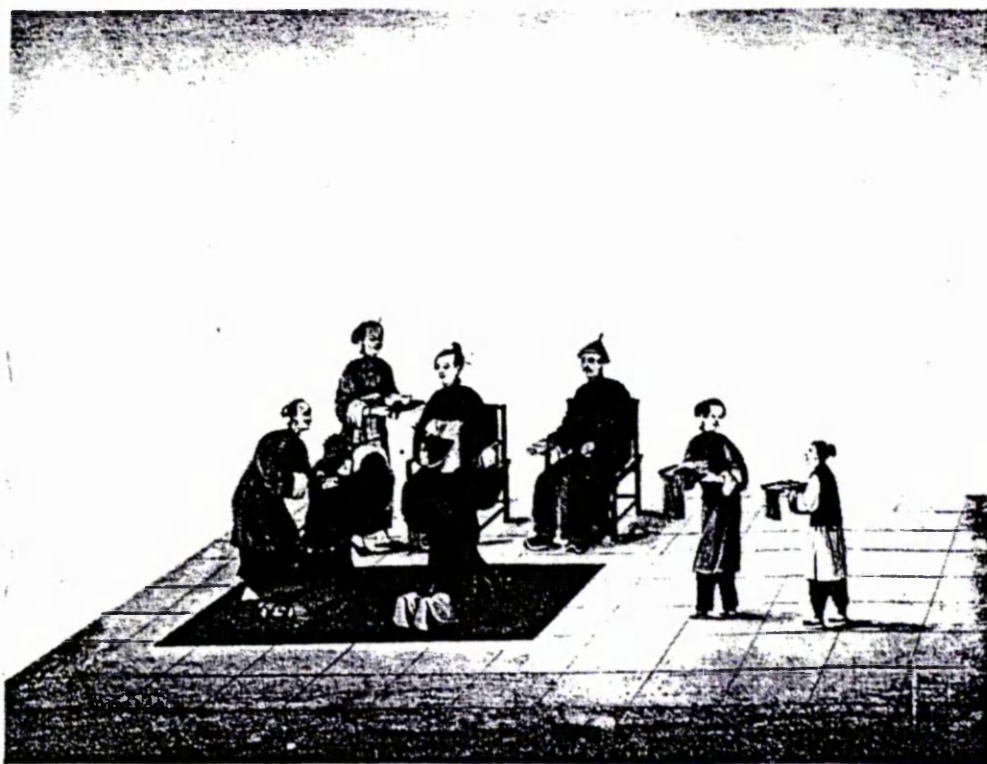


Figure 7. 1 Bride's sedan-chair. Ink on paper. 39 x 48.6 cm. One of a set of 16. Ch. Ptg. 408. British Museum, London.

a



b

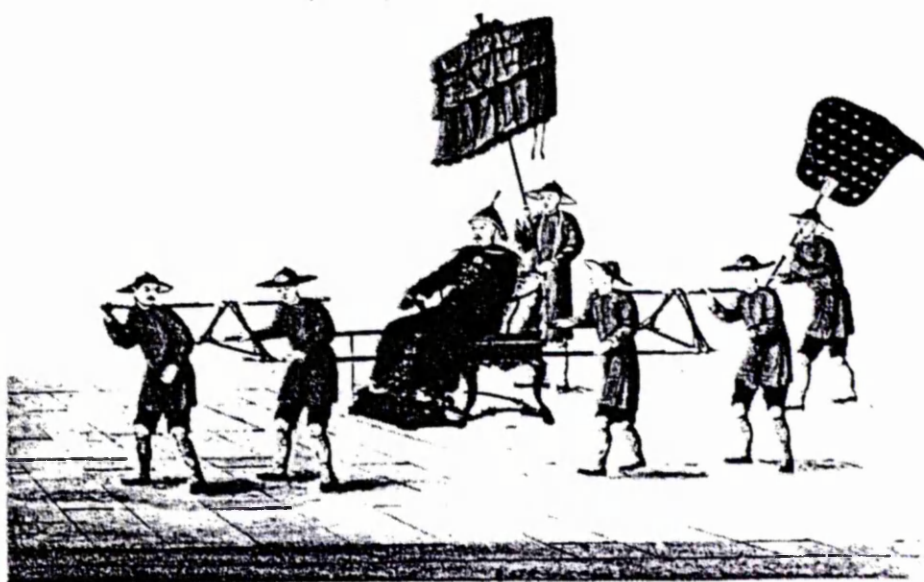


Figure 7. 2 a) The newly-married couple kowtows before the bridegroom's parents. b) Chief examiner on a sedan-chair. Watercolours on paper. 36.8 x 46.4 cm. Two of a set of 12. Add. 209. British Museum, London.



Figure 7. 3 Wedding procession. Watercolours on paper. ca. 1850. 65 x 40 cm. One of a set of five. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

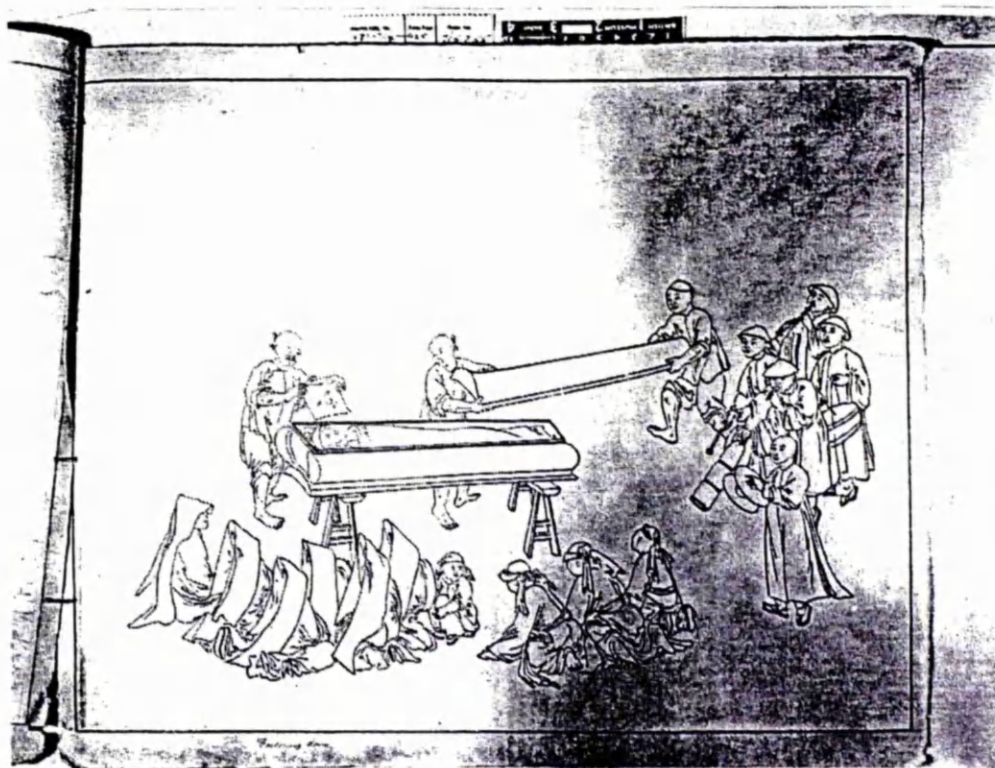


Figure 7. 4 Laying the corpse into the coffin. Ink on paper. 40.3 x 48.8 cm. One of a set of 18. Ch. Ptg. 409. British Museum, London.



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Figure 7. 5 Calculating the funeral expenses. Watercolours on paper. 38 x 51 cm. One of a set of 12. Add. 326. British Museum, London.

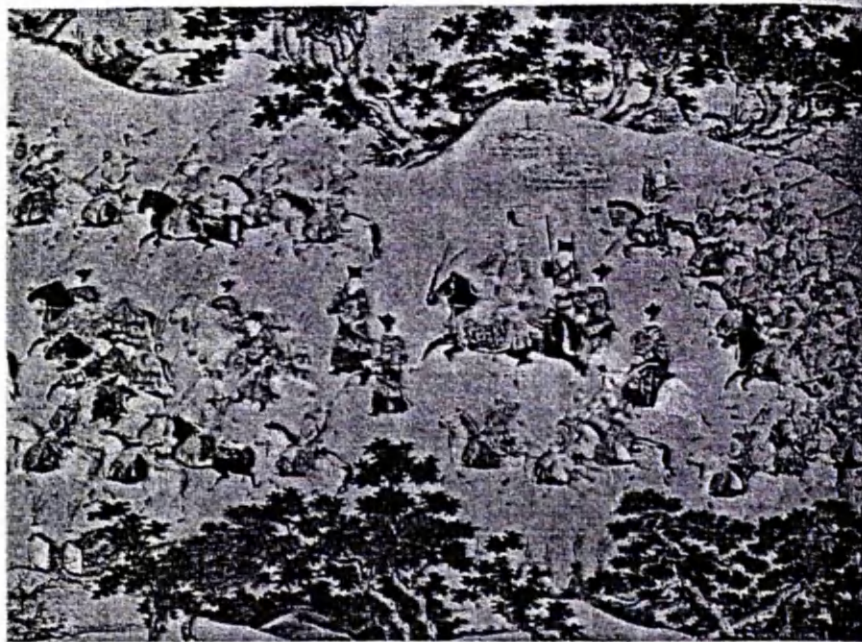


Figure 7. 6 Unknown Chinese artist. Ming Emperor Shizong with his procession departing from the palace. Detail of a horizontal scroll. Watercolours on silk. Second half of the 16th century. 97.5 x 2618.2 cm. One of a set of two. National Palace Museum, Taipei.

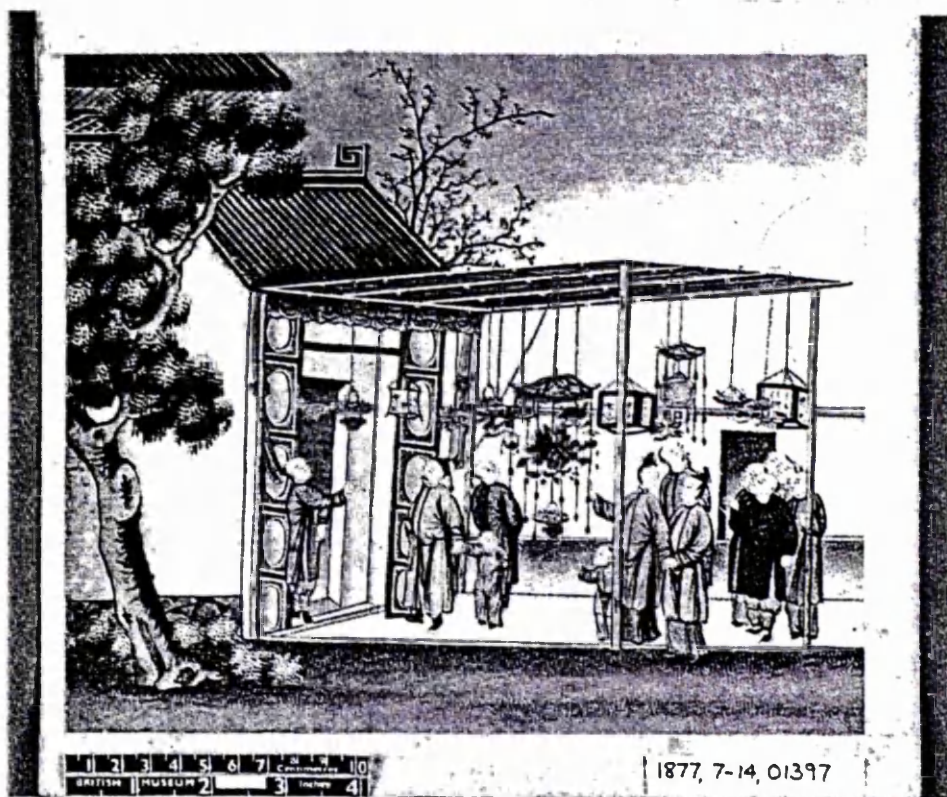


Figure 7. 7 Lantern Festival: admiring lanterns. Watercolours on paper. 28.8 x 30.3 cm. One of a set of seven. Ch. Ptg. 413 Folder 10. British Museum, London.

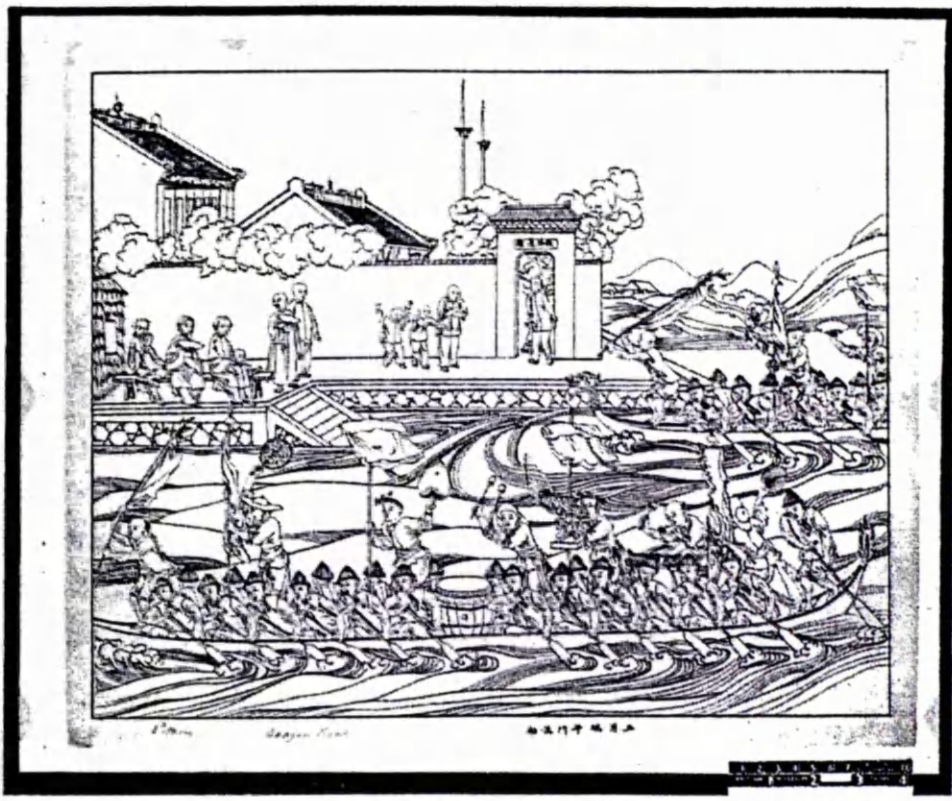


Figure 7. 8 Dragon Boat Festival: the dragon boat race. Ink on paper. 40.8 x 48.7 cm. One of a set of 12. Ch. Ptg. 410. British Museum, London.

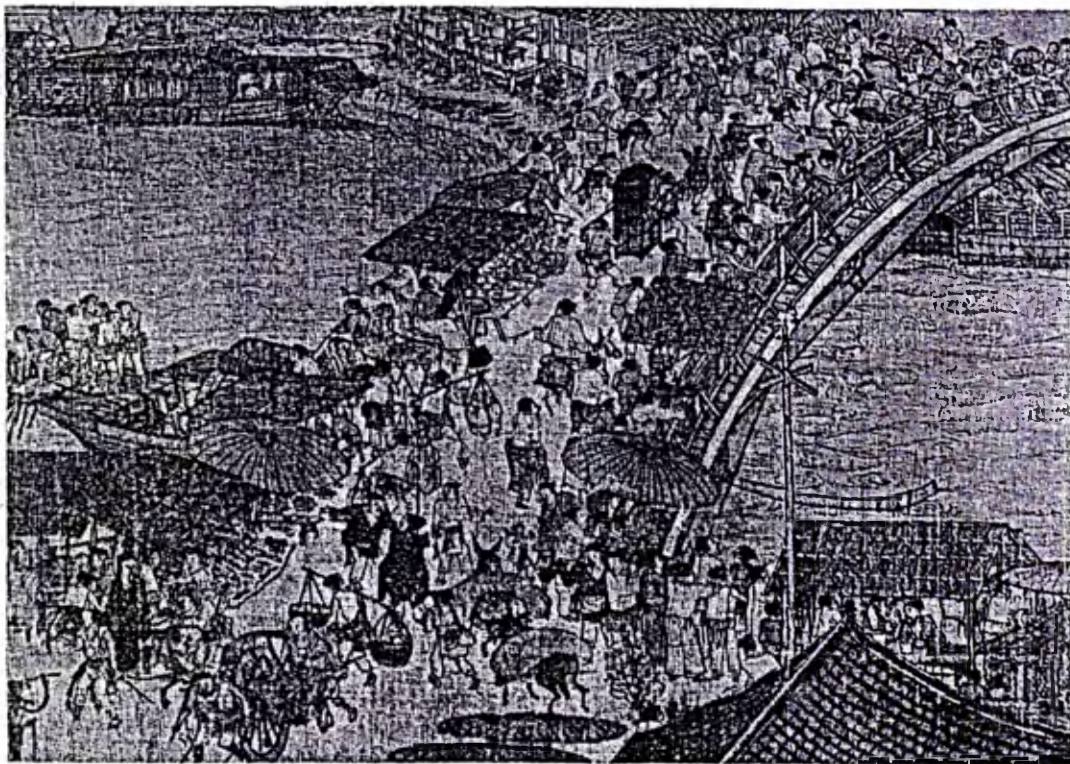


Figure 7. 9 Zhang Zeduan. Riverside scene at the Qing Ming Festival. Detail of a horizontal scroll. Ink and light colour on silk. 11th century. 25.8 x 528.7 cm. Imperial Palace, Beijing.

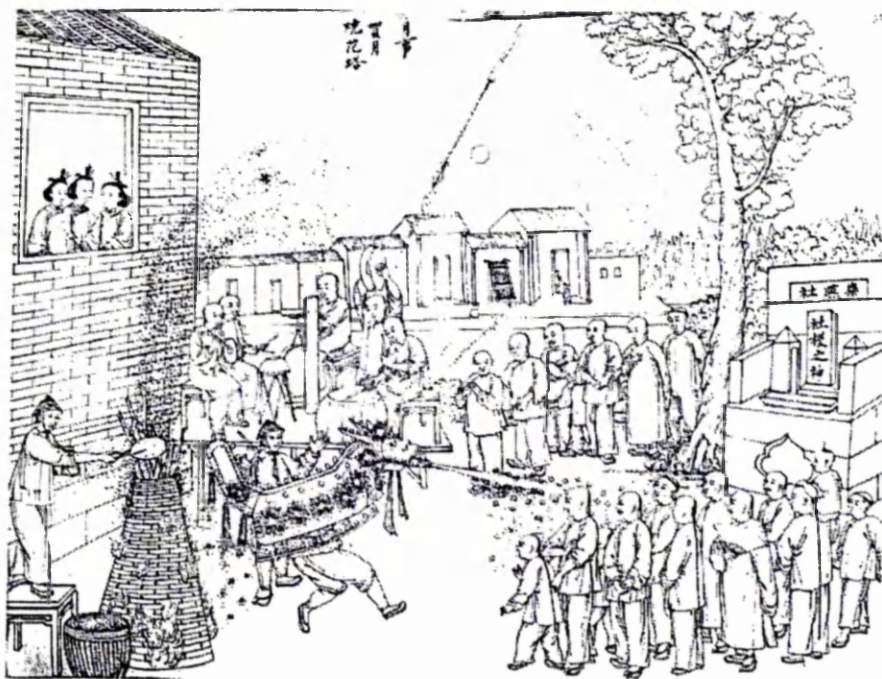


Figure 7. 10 Mid-autumn Festival: enjoying various performances at night. Ink on paper. 36.8 x 48 cm. One of a set of 12. Add. 204. British Museum, London.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the Chinese export watercolours at the British Museum highlights the characteristics of each thematic group, but, at the same time, also leads to some general remarks. First of all, the materials and techniques of execution of the album leaves can be considered.

The majority of the watercolours are on a thin, fairly crisp and translucent paper made from bamboo fibre. Usually the surface is quite smooth and white, but in some cases, impurities, like sand and straw particles, are visible and make the sheet a bit rough. The least refined paper is often used for ink drawings, because, originally produced just as master copies, they were not intended to be sold. It is also possible to find export watercolours on paper made from cotton or from the mulberry bark. Furthermore, later album leaves – especially from the 1820s onwards – can sometimes be made of sheets of pith, a very thin and brittle material consisting of veneers shaved from the pith of the *tongcao* 通草 plant (*tetrapanax papyrifera*). As this material is extremely frail, having no fibres to hold it together, in some cases the painted leaves were pasted onto other sheets of more resistant paper.

In the kind of material chosen lies one of the differences between export painting and traditional painting. As a matter of fact, for the latter, the ‘high art’ painters preferred fine silk and good-quality paper, which were both rather expensive. Precious and sophisticated materials were not suitable for export painting, as the artists producing numerous albums for the foreign market aimed at using the best possible material at the lowest possible cost, in order to offer competitive products and to obtain a good profit.

Because of the particularly absorbent quality of Chinese paper, it was usually necessary to size it, that is to cover it with a dilute layer of alum and animal glue, so that ink and colours would not spread throughout the surface.

Not rarely it happened that the western merchants provided the artists with western paper, which generally was of good quality, less water-absorbent and thicker than Chinese paper. Most of these leaves bear the watermark of the manufacturer and the date of manufacture. Although this element can be used as a *terminus post quem* for the execution of the watercolours, it can’t be regarded as an absolute indication for dating the paintings. As a matter of fact, at least one year should be allowed between

the shipping of the paper from Europe and the production of the watercolours in Canton. Furthermore, it could have also been possible that the paper had been stored by the manufacturers for a few years before being put on the market.

The outline of the drawing was traced with the same black ink commonly used in traditional painting and calligraphy. It is mainly composed of soot – obtained by burning wood or oil – mixed with animal glue and other ingredients. As is still the practice today, the artist ground an ink stick on an inkstone with a little water, and then applied the liquid ink with a brush, tracing lines of different thickness and diluting the ink as required. From the drawings without colours it can be clearly observed that the black ink used was generally very dark and lustrous and very resistant.

Colours were the typical ones of Chinese painting, as well. They are made of mineral and vegetable pigments mixed with animal glue, and used in the form of dry cubes or lumps. In most cases, the colours are brilliant, with a dense texture. For landscapes, green and ochre predominate, the clothes of the figures are almost always in blue or grey, and particularly bright colours, like vermilion, are reserved for small objects and details. Lead white is also frequently used either alone or mixed with other pigments. The natural decay of lead oxide is the explanation given by Clunas for the process of blackening noticed in some watercolours.¹ It is interesting to note the use of lead white as a correction fluid to cover mistakes.

Not much is known about the brushes with which colours and ink were applied. Clunas suggests that they were the same available to Chinese traditional painters, made of animal fur of varying degrees of stiffness.²

Since export watercolours were mass-produced, the execution had to be easy, fast and economical. Thus, master copies and templates for figures were widely adopted and copied many times by using different techniques. This is the reason why similar backgrounds, and figures or other objects with the same outline can be found time and again in different contexts. The preferred method to reproduce a drawing was a simple, mechanical tracing, favoured by the particular transparency of Chinese paper. Often the models only provided an approximate outline, and each artist could freely add the details. If the painting had to be done on thick paper, the reproduction was created copying by eye. This technique required, of course, more time, attention and

¹ Cf. Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours*, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984, p. 76.

² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

a higher level of draughtsmanship, but had the advantage of making the picture livelier.

Inscriptions in black ink are almost always present on the album leaves, placed either on the right side or at the bottom of the sheet. They are short – the number of characters usually ranging between two and ten – and provide a brief description of the represented scene. It is important to point out that these captions are mostly written in Cantonese dialect, as can be noticed from the particular use of some characters and from the indications of pronunciation sometimes added by a foreign hand. In many instances, there is also a brief translation in a western language – mostly English, but sometimes even French or Italian – probably attempted by the purchaser. The characters are written either horizontally, from left to right, according to the western use, or horizontally, from right to left, and vertically, from top to bottom, according to the Chinese use. Especially in later albums, affected by signs of decline in the quality of production, the inscriptions appear irregular and hastily traced, even containing mistaken characters. On the contrary, some albums of the late 18th century and early 19th century bear carefully written captions, with graceful and harmonious characters, as following the traditional rules of good calligraphy, adding to the painting a particular elegant touch. If on the one hand, captions were necessary to explain the depicted subject to the foreigners, on the other hand, it is also true that the presence of words is regarded by many scholars as a distinctive feature of Chinese painting, the inscriptions being either a simple dedication by the painter, or a description of the picture, or a poem.³ As a matter of fact, in the history of Chinese art there has always been a close relationship between painting and calligraphy and in a good-quality work of art the inscription had to be completely integrated in the picture, as part of the composition itself. This is not always the case in export watercolours, but traces of such a principle can be detected in the early specimens.

As far as the composition and the arrangement of the elements in the picture are concerned, they tend to be quite simple and stereotyped.

With the exception of watercolours depicting Chinese sceneries and port views, landscapes and natural features in general are seldom an important component of the paintings. Trees, plants and sometimes mountains only appear on the background of

³ This is stated, for example, by T. C. Lai, as he gives his explanation of what makes a painting 'Chinese'. See T. C. Lai, *Chinese Painting*, Hong Kong, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 1-2.

images contained in albums about production activities and garden scenes. Even in these occurrences, the natural elements are represented in an extremely stylised way, as they were added just to complete the scene and fill in the empty gaps between other elements.

Architectural features are also rendered in a schematic way and only appear in certain thematic groups of watercolours, such as those about production activities, shops, temples and domestic scenes. A few essential elements, like doors, windows and intersection lines between walls, are used to indicate interior scenes. Tiled roofs, posts and pillars represent the exterior appearance of buildings. Especially in images showing production activities and shops the front of the buildings is always wide open, so to allow the viewers to clearly see the activities carried out inside, and the arrangement of furniture and merchandise.

It appears evident that the background had a secondary importance, and in many albums – especially those representing trades and ceremonies – it was considered superfluous, to the extent that, apart from one or a few figures in the middle of the sheet, the rest of the space was left completely blank.

Since the main purpose of the master copies was to provide the artists with outlines, the figures and objects of most of the ink drawings are just roughly sketched, the former looking like puppets without any facial traits, the latter having a more or less geometric shape without any specific connotations. After producing their copy, the painters added all the details according to their needs and taste. The figures always have Chinese features and their faces are more or less realistic and expressive, depending on the style and the ability of the artist. In any case, even if some differences can be noticed in the representation of figures by various artists, those drawn by the same hand tend to be very similar to each other. Rarely being the real protagonists of the scene, they were mostly instruments through which a certain activity or circumstance was illustrated. Thus, there was no need to pay too much attention in trying to differentiate them. The only exceptions were the depictions of gods and legendary figures, which were the principal element of the painting and had to be represented in a very precise way, with distinctive features and costumes.

It is worth emphasising that the stylised rendering of figures, objects, natural and architectural elements, followed specific patterns contained in the handbooks of traditional painting that started circulating from the Ming dynasty onwards. In particular, the most widely-used was the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*

(*Jiezi yuan hua zhuan* 芥子園圖傳), edited by Wang Gai 王概, a minor painter from Zhejiang province. The first part of the book was published in Nanjing in 1679, and the complete version in three parts appeared in 1701.⁴ Beginning with a general theory of the art of painting, instructions to the use of brush and ink, and descriptions of different types of paper and colouring materials, this comprehensive manual contains examples of pictorial devices used in painting, and numerous illustrations of 'types' of rocks, trees, mountains, human figures, and so on. By comparing the drawings of the watercolours and those presented in the book, it is easy to recognise many of the models used by the Canton artists.

Besides the numerous original traits of Chinese painting identified above in export watercolours, it is also necessary to mention the presence of some elements that make the style of these works of art an unusual combination of Chinese and western techniques. Two are the most evident features of foreign derivation. One is the rendering of shadows around the objects, which is a western method for giving the illusion of volume and three-dimensional space, and for creating the impression of a single source of light illuminating the scene. This was not a common practice in traditional Chinese paintings, where the absence of shadows gives a flat aspect to the picture, and the provenance of the light is not made clear. The other western borrowing is the use of the one-point perspective, which creates depth and stability in the image, and a sense of regularity in the observance of relative proportions among the elements of the composition. However, the use of the one-point perspective is not an absolute rule in export watercolours. Hence, sometimes it happens to find the western and Chinese concepts applied together in the same painting. The result is an image that seems to be observed from different points of view at the same time. As a matter of fact, according to the Chinese method, the representative frontal plane is presented fully, accompanied by the side and the top. This kind of 'moving perspective' avoids the problem of foreground elements blocking the view of background objects and allows a clear presentation of all what needs to be shown.

Another characteristic typical of the Chinese representation of objects in the space, which can also be noticed in export paintings, is the technique called "lined painting"

⁴ A facsimile of the 1887-1888 Shanghai edition completely translated into English and edited by Mai-mai Sze was published by Princeton University Press in 1997.

(*jie hua* 界画) by Wang Yaoting.⁵ Architectural objects are represented with slanting lines to suggest depth, but the borders of the object – instead of converging in the back – maintain an even distance as they recede in space and sometimes even grow slightly apart, keeping in this way a visual integrity of the represented plane. Furthermore, objects in the front can be smaller than objects in the back, because the leading criterion in the rendering of dimensions is the emphasis on the most important elements in the composition, independently from their relative position in the space.

The foreign traits that appear in Chinese export watercolours can be explained by the fact that the Canton artists were influenced by the models of European paintings brought to China by the foreigners, and by the fact that the use of some specific western elements – especially in the case of the one-point perspective – may have been requested by the customers themselves.

However, despite the ‘infiltrations’ of western style painting, all the Chinese features in materials and techniques discussed above seem to be enough to confer a ‘Chinese identity’ to these works of art.

Furthermore, what also characterises the export album leaves is the content, which is invariably Chinese. Whether the depicted subjects are landscapes, tradesmen, artisans, deities, public and private ceremonies, scenes of everyday life, or criminal tortures, the watercolours always have the purpose to show all that is most typical of the country. In particular, it should be borne in mind that the authors of these paintings were mostly Cantonese artists who had probably never visited other parts of China outside their own city. Hence, although they tried to suggest a general image of the country, it is likely that what they depicted also reflects some local traditions and customs. It is the case, for example, of the boat race of the Dragon Boat Festival, which is more peculiar to the south-eastern regions.

It has been often argued that the picture of China provided by the export painting is not reliable, because the artists deliberately attempted – sometimes even following the clients’ instructions to do so – to distort the reality, in order to create the impression of an exotic and, in some respects, extravagant world, with a peaceful,

⁵ Wang Yaoting analyses composition and viewpoint in traditional Chinese painting in his *Looking at Chinese Painting*, Tokyo, Nigensha Publishing, 1996, pp. 18-21. The usual translation of *jie hua* is “ruled painting”.

enjoyable environment.⁶ This view can be accepted in the case of a certain number of album leaves. Such examples are colourful and vivid representations of gods and myths, and idyllic scenes describing production processes - like picking mulberry leaves, and decorating porcelain - as relaxed, graceful activities. However, the argument does not apply to other categories of watercolours, such as the scientific botanical and zoological reproductions, the faithful port views, or some characteristic portraits of Chinese trades and craftsmen.

Despite the presence of whimsical and idealised elements, it can't be denied that the core of the subjects depicted in export watercolours is based on the authentic ground of the Chinese realm, with its society, way of life, institutions, celebrations, beliefs, economy, costumes, habits, and so on. Furthermore, considering the great variety of different aspects and features represented, these thousands of paintings can be appropriately considered as the most comprehensive and accurate visual documentation about China that could be obtained by the western public at a time when communications between Europe and the Far East were still very difficult and slow. Thus, at this point, it becomes apparent that Chinese export watercolours are a legitimate part of Chinese artistic heritage, as well as a precious historical and anthropological record of Chinese civilization.

⁶ This theory is supported, for instance, by G. H. R. Tillotson in *Fan Kwae Pictures*, London, Spink & Son Ltd., 1987, p. 60.

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